

HONOR BOUND

by JACK BETHEA



A POWERFUL STORY OF A
GALLANT FIGHT AGAINST
OVERWHELMING ODDS

HONOR BOUND

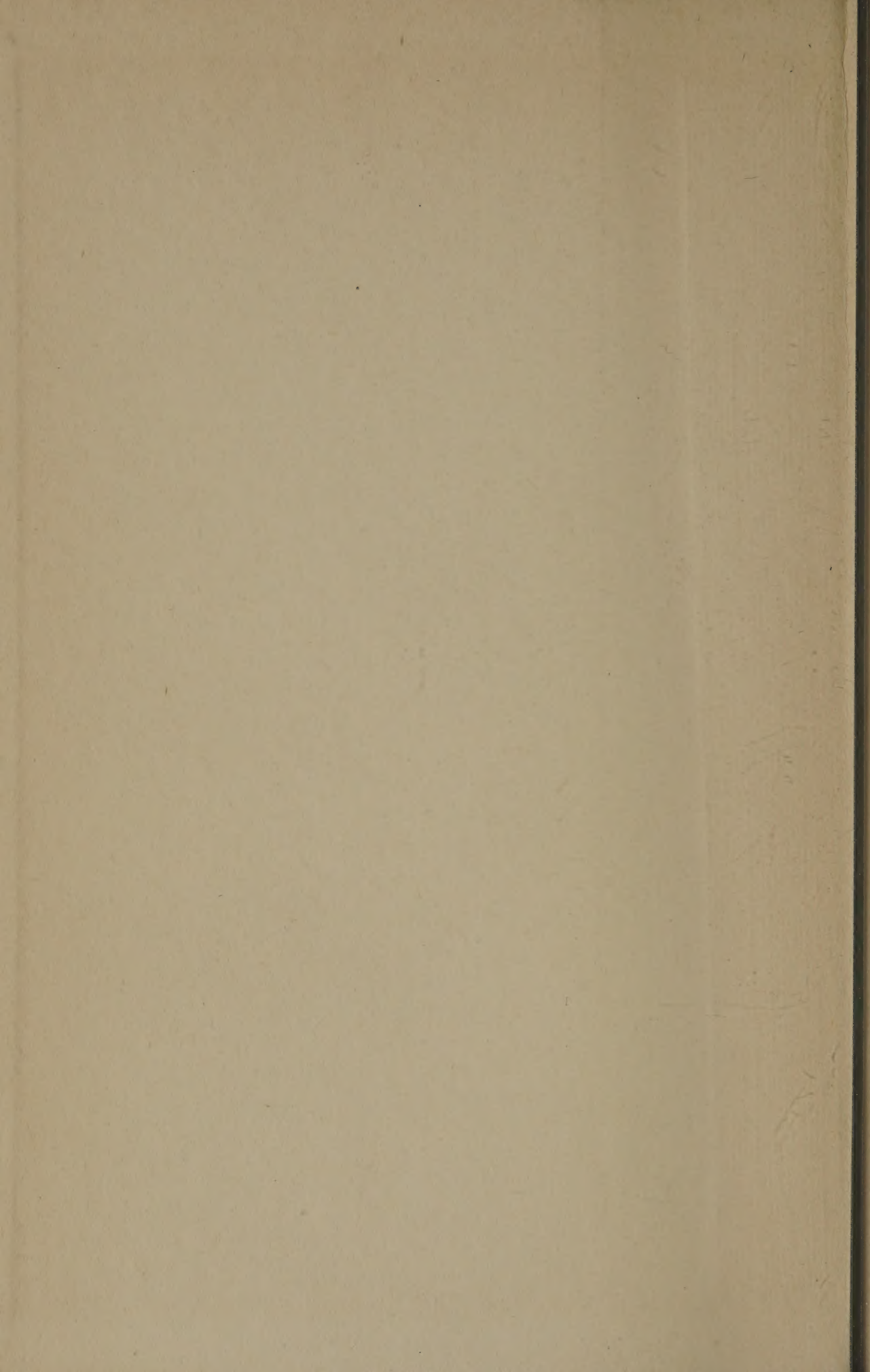
By Jack Bethea

Author of 'Bed Rock' and 'The Deep Seam'

READERS of 'Bed Rock' and 'The Deep Seam' will welcome this dramatic and exciting story. Mortimer, a coal baron, desiring a convict chauffeur, selects for the position Ogletree, a prisoner leased for work in the mines. Although the convict falls in love with the gallant daughter of the prison doctor, Mortimer suspects him of a flirtation with his wife, whom Ogletree knew before his imprisonment, and plots to have Ogletree meet his death in the mines. How this thrilling situation reaches its grim climax makes one of the finest stories that Jack Bethea has ever written, and a novel that will hold its readers from the first page to the last.

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y JACK BETHEA



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BY
JACK BETHEA

AUTHOR OF 'BED ROCK' AND
'THE DEEP SEAM'



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TO
JEAN BETHEA

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CHAPTER I

JOHN OGLETREE'S lean face grew darker as he clambered down from the Cincinnati Limited in the wake of the other convicts shackled to the chain held by Ed Carole.

Birmingham again after two years! He pulled at the handcuffs that linked his right wrist to the chain and his lips twisted in a savage sneer. He had almost said home!

The men behind crowded him, and automatically he moved forward two paces and waited while another pair dropped from the high step. Two paces more and another wait. Gradually the train disgorged the twenty convicts; they formed in a double file beside the cars and waited for Carole, the transfer agent, to finish his laughter with the conductor.

Ogletree shifted the bundle under his left arm and looked about him. He was vaguely surprised that two years should have brought so few changes. The trainshed was no more dingy; the clatter of traffic from the cobblestones outside was not lessened; the street cars still clanked across Twentieth Street with the same bumps. Somehow he had expected home — Birmingham — to be different.

Then he realized that the change was in him. He was incredibly older; bitter; filled with a rancid distaste for living and hating — no wonder . . .

Ogletree had long since ceased to feel shame at his convict garb. He bore unmoved the stares of the disembarking

passengers. He even considered the possibility of seeing a familiar face. He was indifferent. The past had no power to move him save to hatred of himself for his clumsiness, for his gullible belief in human nature — in friendship.

For a moment as Ogletree stood he glimpsed the future in one flashing glance. He had gone to prison because of stupidity. Of that crime he had been guilty; his had been an unwitting offense — but not again. He was wiser.

His eyes level, he met the stares of people who looked curiously at the group of white-clad figures in the long line beside the train that was preparing to depart. There was a sameness about them that instantly arrested attention — their posture, their queer way of holding one arm, as if it were tethered; the bundles carried by each; and, lastly, the man who leaned on a sawed-off shotgun and laughed with the conductor.

‘Oh, just a bunch of convicts on their way to the mines!’

‘By golly! they’re all big fellows.’

‘Sure. No other kind don’t last long there.’

Sometimes people paused for a better look. Ogletree surveyed them, his gaze sardonic. He wanted to lift his hand and display the shackle welded to the chain and shake it at them with one word —

‘Look!’

Instead, he stood immobile. That was what he had learned at Madison. He could dissemble his feelings; his emotions were covered with iron restraint.

He had schooled himself in the penitentiary; taught himself to keep silent on occasion and speak glibly on others. That lesson was most valuable. Sometimes silence served to hide his thoughts; again, words — he chose which suited.

Outwardly he was subservient to prison discipline. He learned to smile at the witticisms of the guards even while his eyes glowed under downcast lids in scorn of their gross-

ness. He learned to smirk and cheer when the warden waddled through the corridors, at his heels a train of breathless, gasping visitors, agape through the bars. He closed his ears to their merciless comment on the animals confined within the cells and answered with scrape and bow the questions asked.

He never ran afoul of the rules of the penitentiary. Even while he sneered at his own hypocrisy, he forced himself to attend the religious services that were held regularly. He had no desire to acquire an evil reputation in the prison; no wish to exchange his white suit for the blue stripes of the unruly.

In the prison office where he labored over books with other convicts, he performed his work with meticulous care. No papers of his ever came back from the chief clerk's office with the blue marks that meant demerits.

But behind his complaisance, his thoughts were busy with the future — not the past. Certain legacies of hate he would take with him into the new world to be faced when the prison doors should open — but nothing more.

For two years he moved with such guarded caution that no summons came from the warden. He escaped the darkness of the solitary cell where rites were performed that men whispered of under cover of the cheering at the Sunday afternoon baseball games.

'Heard about Stinky Barrett?'

'No. What?'

'Guard house. Sassed a deputy.'

'How many?'

'Twenty lashes. He's in the hospital.'

Strangely enough, for all his hatred of the prison, John Ogletree had never seriously considered the possibility of escaping. Once the thought had come to him, but he had rejected it instantly. Seven years was not long. He could

wait. He had no fancy for police hounds baying on his trail. He proposed to pay his pound of flesh and if afterward he collected interest that was usurious — well, let them catch him if they could.

The train by now was all but emptied and behind him he could see a switch engine backing cautiously down to pick up the sleeping-car dropped by the northbound flyer. Ogletree smiled a tight-lipped smile at the sight of the white cushions in the windows that slipped past him. His mind jumped ahead to the future — when he was free.

Carole at last finished his talk with the conductor. There was a final loud laugh and a wave of the hand as the railroad man swung aboard the departing train.

‘So long, Charlie!’

‘Luck to you, Ed! That last one was good.’

Carole turned to the waiting file of convicts and dropped his shotgun into the crook of one arm. His geniality left him. He moved off with a curt word.

‘Step out now. I wanta git you offen my hands till mornin’. Then we’ll go out to Alamosa.’

They followed him down the trainshed to Twentieth Street and then north through the heart of the town toward the county jail where they were to be locked up for the night’s wait until the Alamosa Accommodation ran the next morning. Ogletree knew the place; he had spent the weeks before his trial there and the week after, waiting for transfer to the Madison Penitentiary at the Alabama Capital at Montgomery.

But just now his thoughts were not of Alamosa nor of Madison, but of Birmingham. Behind him at the head of Twentieth Street he could catch the shadowy outlines of Red Mountain. As he twisted his head to look, a tiny cluster of lights crept up the steep incline and he knew it to be a street car bound for Edgewood. For one breath he yielded

to the homesickness that swept him suddenly and then crushed it out.

This was not home! The familiar streets meant nothing to him. He had no home, nor could have again. Such things belonged to the past, and that he had put definitely away from him. But his blood moved a bit faster when he saw the squares where he had once . . .

It was early and the streets were still crowded. On the sidewalks people stopped to stare at the column of men who moved along the center of the car tracks without regard for traffic.

They were all of a type, dressed in white canvas drill; brogan shoes, visorless caps, and denim shirts. Each bore under his free arm a bundle containing all the possessions allowed him by the State; socks, underwear, a comb, perhaps. John's bundle was not heavy.

But the stares were at the manacles, at the chain that clanked in rhythm to their pace, at Carole's grim face and the ugly little shotgun that could — and had — scatter death among crowded men.

Carole moved briskly and the men swung along behind with practiced step. John moved with the best of them, but that did not prevent his gazing about. He was glad of the months in which he had schooled himself to insensibility. He was not ashamed, he told himself fiercely, thus to come back home in shackles — in the garb of a convict. What did it matter if he were recognized!

But for all his outward indifference he suffered. It was not in the man to escape the agony of humiliation that was inevitable. He was hardened, but he was still human. Only blood lust could have swallowed this hidden softness, and that he did not have.

Their course led through the Loop to the North Side. Finally John's shoulders moved in a tiny shrug. He tired of

looking at the crowds that lined the curbs and gaped at the procession. John withdrew into himself, sinking his consciousness deep within himself and doling it out parsimoniously. It was as if a haze enveloped him. He moved through it automatically. Often he did this and found solace in his power to blot everything from his mind in virtual unconsciousness.

Ogletree came to himself when Carole turned into Jail Alley and the unsightly pile of the Big Rock lay before them. Jail Alley was unchanged, too. He knew it well.

Formalities at the jail were quickly over. 'Transfers from Madison for Alamosa,' Carole announced to the warden behind the outer grating. He tossed over a bundle of papers.

The warden thumbed them carefully and raised a stentorian shout for a stevedore. 'Turn 'em in!' Then he spoke apologetically to Carole.

'We're kind of crowded. You got twenty here. We'll have to double 'em up.'

'Hell! I don't care what you do with 'em. Turn 'em in so's I can take off the cuffs. I got a little job downtown that's waitin' for me.'

Inside the jail, where the musty odor of cockroaches and fried bacon brought a grimace of distaste to Ogletree's face, the men were freed from their shackles. None spoke as they were led off in couples to the white section; the negroes were carried downstairs to the Glory Hole.

John found himself paired with a grizzled convict whom he knew vaguely as Gid Ames. He remembered that their arms had been joined in the chain handcuffs. Ames, too, could be silent, for they had shared a seat all the way from Madison with never a word from either. But now Ames sat on the edge of the steel bunk and stirred the single blanket that covered it.

'Reckon there's any bugs?'

'There were plenty when I was here,' John answered absently. In the obscurity of the cell he could take the mask from his face and let his emotions show through. He was startled. The sight of Birmingham had shaken him. He had thought himself callous, but the crust was not so deep as he had hoped.

Ames bent over, and John saw his graying hair in the dim light of the single electric globe that burned in the corridor.

'I'm shore glad to git shet of them damn things,' he said, chafing the wrist that had borne the handcuff. 'I could do with a little snack of vittles.'

There was something whimsical in his tone that awoke an answering note in John in spite of his sullen misery. Involuntarily he explained again.

'They don't have but two meals a day here — breakfast and dinner.'

Ames straightened and John could feel his eyes on him even through the semi-darkness. 'You been here before?'

'Yes,' said John curtly.

'You lived in this town before — before ——'

'Yes.' John's tone was curter, but Ames ignored his shortness.

'Doggone! I wouldn't mine ef I could see whar I come from.' He was silent a moment, and then added brightly, 'But, shucks! ef wishes was bakin you could grease all yore skilletts.'

John did not answer. He drank lukewarm water from the faucet in the corner of the cell and settled himself in stubborn silence. Ames was oblivious of his quietness.

'You know,' he said reflectively, 'I'm so dum full of talk, I b'lieve I could go steady for a week an' never say the same thing twict. Feels kind of good to git back home, don't it, son?'

John moved at the word and laughed harshly. 'No,' he said.

Ames peered at him through the gloom. 'Better savor it while you kin. Take a good long look in the mornin'.'

Some cadence in the man's tone stirred John to denial. 'I'm not interested,' he said.

Ames shook his head and gnawed a generous chew from a plug of tobacco he took from his pocket. He extended it invitingly toward John and pouched it when Ogletree shook his head.

'You hadn't orter feel that a-way, son,' he reproved.

'How do you know how I feel?' John asked with a hardly suppressed sneer.

''Cause I been right 'long where you is now. You git that a-way at first an' then you git over hit. How much time did you bring with you?'

'Seven years. I've done two.'

John did not ask the corollary question. He was incurious, interested solely in his own thoughts, but Ames took up his reply and John gave ear to his drawling words.

'You done two. That ain't nothin'. I already done ten.'

John grunted and began to climb into the upper bunk, but Ames laid a detaining hand on his arm. 'Yore name's Ogletree, ain't hit?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Him they called Dumb John?'

John hadn't known they called him that, but he acquiesced in the name. 'I suppose so.'

'Know who I am?'

'No.'

Ames laughed at the shortness of the answer. 'I know what yore thinkin' — that you don't care. But that don't make no diff'runce. I kind of feel sorry for you 'cause I

been a-watchin' you. Come on off yore high horse, son, an' loosen up.'

John's voice grew ironical. He even managed a laugh. 'Sorry for me! That's good! Why the hell should you be sorry for me? I don't need it.'

'I'm sorry for what's gonna happen to you,' Ames drawled and John was sobered by his sincerity.

'What do you mean?'

'You heard where we was goin', didn't you?'

'Yes. To Alamosa.'

'Know who's warden at Alamosa?'

'No.'

'Blood Keller!'

'Is he worse than Garner?'

'We-ell, 'bout the same diff'runce 'tween 'em as there is 'tween a bumblebee an' a muskeeter.'

'I'll get along,' said John comfortably.

'Ever dig any coal?' asked Ames, and when John shook his head: 'Well, that's what yore goin' to do down there—all of us.'

Again John shook his head. 'I guess not. They'll put me in the office like they did at Madison. I don't care where I work.'

'That's 'cause you ain't worked nowheres but in Madison. They keeps that there prison spick and span 'cause hit's at Montgomery an' Montgomery's the Capital of Alabama where all the big bugs do their visitin'. I knowed you thought that an' it ain't my nature to let a fello' creetur walk into hell unbeknownst. You got any drag with the folks at Montgomery?'

'Can't say I have,' answered John coolly. 'All I need is to do my work.'

Ames laughed scornfully. 'You ain't never been at Alamosa. Got any dollar ile to slip Keller?'

'Dollar oil?' John was bewildered. By now he had forgotten his reluctance to talk. 'Dollar oil? You mean money? No. I haven't any money.'

'I knowed it,' said Ames calmly. 'Yore gonna dig coal. And, son, diggin' coal is hell when you don't know how. I been there.'

'You mean they sell jobs at Alamosa?' John asked, his tone reflective.

'No. They don't sell 'em,' answered Ames in quiet sarcasm. 'But them that ain't got no money don't git 'em an' them that has money don't dig coal an' don't keep their money. Figger it out for yourself.'

John banged his fist on the iron bunk and swore between his teeth. He did not raise his voice. 'By God! if they try that on me, I'll ——'

Ames finished the sentence. 'You'll dig coal an' sweat like hell,' he said dryly. 'You ain't never been to Alamosa, but I have. There's ways of makin' you work that you ain't woke up to. Guess you thought Madison was a hell of a place.' He spat into a corner of the cell. 'Son, she was heav'n 'longside Alamosa. What'd you do to git sont there?'

'Nothing,' said Ogletree, his assurance badly shaken.

'G'wan, don't come that on me. Don't you know that Alamosa's where they send the bad eggs so's Blood Keller kin tame 'em? What'd you do? Go south with somethin' or have a run in with a guard?'

'I don't know why I was transferred. They just told me to get ready, that I was going to Alamosa.'

'Didn't you have no friends that could of told you what——'

Ogletree fired at the words. 'Friends!' he cried, though his voice was still carefully subdued. 'No. I had no friends and I don't want any.'

'Ain't no way for a feller to feel,' Ames rebuked. 'Ain't natural.'

'Natural or not, it's the way I feel. Friends don't help you. They'll take things from you until you get into trouble. Then — but, oh! hell! what's the use!'

'I judge you had a unfortunite experience with them friends you have had,' commented Ames, and waited for Ogletree to tell the experience, but John shut his mouth firmly and turned away his head. 'Me, I'm differently con-stit-u-ated. I'm just 'bleeged to have friends.'

In spite of his bitterness, Ogletree smiled. 'Is that why you picked on me?' he asked.

'That's why I picked you,' responded Ames imperturbably.

Ogletree again turned ugly. 'You've made a damn poor pick,' he said brusquely.

'S all right. You don't raise yore crop of corn in one day. Takes a lot of plowin' 'fore fodder-pullin' time.'

Ogletree glanced at him and shrugged. 'Suit yourself. There's a lot of things you can't help when you've got on this.' He gestured down at his white canvas suit.

'You're feelin' mighty biggity now, but wait 'till Blood Keller gits holt of you. I 'low you'll sing another tune then. You see, I was there for the better part of three years an' I know.'

'If Alamosa is such a hell of a place, why did they send you back?'

'Well, one of them fat guards kept pickin' on me. Kept sendin' my shirts back from the in-spector's. 'Twa'n't nothin' wrong with 'em. I was in the shirt fact'ry, you know. Then he got to layin' for me out in the yard. I warned that man twict. Then I climbed him. Done a pretty good job, too, 'fore they pulled me off. So I'm on my way back to Alamosa. But, hell! I never did like fat men nohow.'

A bell rang stridently and about them the lights went out and the jail corridors echoed to the sharp calls from the stevedores. 'Pipe down now!' 'Cut out the joy!' The cries quieted and gave place presently to stertorous snores. John Ogletree lay on his back and gazed at the lattice work of steel above him.

Coal mines! He pieced together what he had heard. Once he had been in the hospital at Madison and had seen a man — tuberculosis — coal dust in the lungs — pneumonia. His thoughts went endlessly. Accidents — traps for the unwary . . . What had he heard? There were men at Madison who had gone to the mines and come back mere shells.

He had never thought of digging coal. He had taken it for granted that he would be given office work. Under him Ames breathed hard. Now and then he gulped noisily. Insensibly John Ogletree warmed to the thought of him. A friend . . . Then he cursed himself for forgetting so easily.

Always his thoughts came back to the mines. Suppose he should be — no future then — no chance for the new life he had planned.

Hatred shook him — hatred of everything and everybody. A trapped feeling of helplessness gripped him. For the first time he realized what it meant to be in prison — to be a convict — at the mercy of others. No longer an individual.

He was daunted, but before he slept some measure of poise came back to him. No one should know of his fright or his dread.

But his last waking thought was of the warden at Alamosa. Blood Keller! The name was enough!

CHAPTER II

THE two men in the office of the Alamosa Coal Company were utterly dissimilar and yet there was a kindred note in their faces; an intangible quality that was differently translated into flesh and yet pitched in the same key.

Mortimer was big; moulded on generous lines so perfectly proportioned that the effect of his size was diminished. He lolled easily in his chair and looked across his desk at the slim, almost effeminate, figure facing him.

Binford Keller was immaculately dressed. His collar, shirt, and tie were of the same shade of blue and a handkerchief of the same hue peeped from the pocket of his gray coat. His face was narrow, the nose arching above thin lips and a small, firm chin. His slate-blue eyes were set rather wide apart under delicately penciled brows. He stretched out a manicured finger to touch the check that Mortimer had just written.

'You know better than that, Mr. Mortimer. I'll take money.'

He spoke easily, his tones musical, his inflection flutelike in its precise intonations. Only his eyes belied the softness of his words. He met Mortimer's look squarely and nodded as he took a cigarette from a silver case and blew a cloud of perfumed smoke across the room.

'I am partial to currency,' he said. 'I would rather not have a check from the Alamosa Company president.'

Mortimer's face wrinkled in a hard smile, his even teeth gleaming under his short-clipped mustache that was as black as his hair.

'You still don't trust me?'

'No,' said Keller musically. 'No more than I must to do business with you.'

Mortimer did not resent the words. He lifted the check and drew it through his fingers — big fingers, long and spatulate at the end of powerful arms. 'Perhaps you are right,' he said and slowly tore the green paper into small strips. 'But it's rather inconvenient to carry so much cash in the safe.'

Keller shrugged. 'One must suffer some inconveniences,' he said. 'It is a penalty of business.'

Mortimer rose and went to a safe in the corner, moving with catlike grace. He returned to his seat with a black box that he unlocked with a key from his ring. He looked at Keller across the lifted lid that disclosed bundles of currency neatly stacked in packets.

'If I am to pay in cash, perhaps we should have an accounting now,' he said.

Both men were speaking as if they had not many times before enacted this same scene in almost the identical words. Keller nodded at Mortimer's suggestion.

'You hope to catch me napping eventually, don't you, Mr. Mortimer?' he asked pleasantly.

Mortimer did not deny the charge. 'I protect myself,' he said blandly.

'But not at my expense. A canceled check from the Alamosa Company to the Alamosa warden could cause questions at the state convict department in Montgomery. The Capital is rather curious about some things, you know.'

'When they aren't getting their share,' said Mortimer equably.

'Exactly,' said Keller, and drew from his pocket a small memorandum book. This he consulted in silence, flicking the pages delicately. Once an eyebrow lifted and a faint smile curved his thin lips. Then again it was a sneer.

With one huge hand covering the money, Mortimer waited. Behind Keller, through the window, he caught glimpses of Alamosa. One corner of the gaunt white stockade of the prison was visible and behind that the gleam of Silver Lake. Across the lake the green of the forest was swallowed up eventually in the blue of Honeysuckle Mountain. Mortimer saw the scene only vaguely; he was thinking of the man before him.

Keller was wary. Not once in the two years since Mortimer had come to Alamosa and reached an understanding with the slim little warden had Mortimer been able to bend him.

Mortimer smiled a little grimly at the thought of their relations. Neither trusted the other, but there was no rancor between them. Theirs was strictly a commercial understanding. Keller had something to sell and Mortimer bought it. In neither was there any squeamishness. Therein lay the emotion common to both.

Keller at last was ready to speak. 'I'm doing this in round numbers, giving and taking a few hundred tons,' he said, his words precise. Mortimer picked up a pencil and began to jot down the figures as Keller talked.

'Last month under your contract with the State the prison turned over to you four hundred convicts of varying classes. By the medical classification, these men were required to get out twenty-one thousand tons of coal in the twenty-four working days of the month. I find that seventy-one men during the month for various reasons were in the hospitals for stays of varying length. This reduced the working—'

'Never mind the details,' interrupted Mortimer. 'How much did they actually send up, according to your figures?'

'I merely wanted you to appreciate what I did so that you would not think I was overpaid,' Keller explained, his voice almost too pleasant. 'Now by virtue of deductions for rock

on the tipple and for dirt in the washer, I find that the convicts leased to you sent up a total of twenty-eight thousand tons, of which a little more than twenty-six thousand tons was net.'

Mortimer consulted a book of his own that he drew from his desk, nodded and began to count out money. 'So that I owe you for five thousand tons.'

Keller returned his book to his pocket and lit another cigarette. Mortimer looked at him, annoyance in his face.

'Can't you smoke something that doesn't smell so loudly?' he suggested. 'It's close in here.'

'Certainly,' Keller agreed and stepped to a window and flung it up. He stood for a moment and then tossed the perfumed cigarette outside.

'You owe me for five thousand seven hundred and sixty-one tons,' he said briskly. 'Make it even money. At ten cents a ton that's five hundred and — oh, make it five hundred and seventy-five dollars even. Not bad for a little jockeying with the scales and a cut for the scales weighman.'

Mortimer looked up curiously. 'It isn't any of my affair,' he said, 'but how many ways do you cut that?'

'The scales man gets a hundred and I generally scatter another hundred around the office,' Keller explained readily. 'I call it bonuses, but they're wise all right and our books are always in order.'

Mortimer nodded in satisfaction. 'The arrangement is profitable for me and for you,' he said. 'I get some of my coal out for ten cents a ton and you make a nice stake for yourself.'

Mortimer paid over the money and Keller put the bills carefully in a wallet. Mortimer lit a cigar and his black eyes grew speculative.

'We're getting over twenty-five thousand tons a month

now,' he said. 'I wonder if we could press it? I can place all I can get up to thirty-five thousand tons a month.'

Keller shook his head decidedly. 'There is a limit to the amount you can dock them without starting trouble,' he said regretfully. 'I am just about there now. You see you can take a couple of hundred pounds off every car, and dock a man a car now and then for rock, and, if you do it judiciously they'll never make trouble. I keep it distributed. But if you tap the cars too much, there will be protests, though I've made them a little careful about that. We don't want to stir up the folks at Montgomery now.' He laughed musically. 'Alabama politicians ask a lot of questions sometimes. Let's keep the Capital out of this.'

Mortimer rose and drew down his desk top. 'I guess you're right,' he said. 'But I'd like to have that coal. How about more men? You have a number who do nothing that I can see.'

Keller's thin lips drew together. 'You know our agreement,' he said precisely. His voice grew thin and whispery, but he did not raise his tone. 'I was to keep the hospital list down and have certain convicts whom I designated. None of them is idle without it being profitable.'

'To you, but how about the State?' Mortimer's teeth showed again under his mustache as he smiled.

'I'm not in business for the State,' Keller said and shrugged. 'The State pays me a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month. If I didn't have a few pickings I would starve.'

'No fear of that,' Mortimer said. 'You must be getting close to six hundred a month. Well, there is no reason this should not continue.'

Although the afternoon was nearly over, Mortimer remained at his desk after Keller left.

He had gambled and he was in a fair way of winning.

He had been warned by the disasters of others. He knew the pitfalls of convict mines; idle days when no coal was produced; men sick in the hospital. He had analyzed the perils before he had committed himself. He had seen others come to bankruptcy because of convict leases, but he had watched and grown wise.

He bought Keller. That closed one avenue of peril. His labor was secure. The mine he had undertaken to manage himself. There were few breaks in production. And sales—he had seen to that, too. Because he had studied and watched he had been able to take the Alamosa mine when no other would have it. He had known what to do.

When the time came he proposed to use the Alamosa mine to pry open the financial gates in Birmingham and operate in coal on a really big scale. He had an idea for mines to ship to tidewater. . . . His big face grew expressionless as he looked into the future.

At last he roused, closed his desk and took his hat from the chair. In the outer office the chief clerk and his two assistants had long since gone.

Mortimer walked slowly down the main street of the little town. It was amazing that so fair an aspect could hide so much of misery.

The prison was on the shore of Silver Lake, and the great white fence that enclosed the stockade buildings ran down almost to the water that caught the reflection of the surrounding mountains.

Outside his office, Mortimer turned east to the gentle eminence where his own home stood. This was an Italian bungalow of red brick, with white facings at the windows and a flagged walk that led through the flowers in the front yard. Behind him the tipple spread its sooty framework and the grimy washer spouted water endlessly into the tireless buckets.

The prison was isolated as if it were a very plague spot — as indeed it was. Sometimes, when the wind was from the south, Mortimer, even on his porch, could catch the fetid odor that is inseparable from jails be they of concrete or adobe.

Life within the stockade was not visible from the outside. Alamosa was of two worlds. Inside the great board fence, whitewashed until it glistened in the sun, one world had its existence. Outside the walls, studded by the pent-houses that sheltered the guards ever facing inward, was another. The two touched but never mingled, and each hated the other with a bitter hatred that can be engendered only by daily misunderstanding.

A figure in white was working among the rosebushes as Mortimer came up the flagged walk and he paused and spoke.

‘Find any more cut-worms, Jim?’

The negro convict straightened. ‘Sho’ did, Mist’ Paul,’ he said, with an ingratiating grin. ‘They got most of the jonquils, but I kotched ’em ’fore they got to the roses.’

Mortimer grunted. ‘Keep after them. I don’t want to lose any of those roses.’

He passed on to the porch and paused at the step. His face, had it been weaker, might have reflected uneasiness as he glanced toward the swinging couch where a woman was ensconced among cushions. As it was, his eyes were impassive when he moved over and took the chair at her feet.

Evelyn Mortimer opened violet eyes at his step. She spoke languidly.

‘Dinner will be served presently.’

She closed her eyes again and resumed her slow swaying under the guidance of a dainty toe. She was a glorious creature as she lay relaxed among the cushions, but Mor-

timer's eyes did not light possessively as he surveyed her. She lay back with every line of her outlined under the thin summer dress. For a moment Mortimer's brows came down and his face darkened, but when he spoke his voice was calm.

'Still in the depths?'

'If you mean lonely, yes.' Evelyn spoke without opening her eyes. 'Who wouldn't be?'

Mortimer manifested unexpected patience. His tone was equable as if he were arguing the merits of a business transaction — as it was from his viewpoint.

'I'm sorry that I cannot sympathize with you a great deal. I ——'

'Too busy, I suppose,' Evelyn interrupted.

'No. Not if I thought it was warranted, which I don't. You were a grown woman when we married. Did I keep anything from you?'

Evelyn gestured wearily. 'What's the use of going over all that?' She sat up and pulled the cushions about her. 'I didn't realize what living here would mean; I didn't understand the absolute isolation of it. You never told me how a convict town was regarded. You can't ask any one here. You can't do anything——'

'I haven't stinted you with money. I've given you everything you could wish for here.' Mortimer defended himself calmly.

'You haven't given me companionship and you will not let me go elsewhere,' she retorted. Her tone was growing increasingly bitter.

'Do you wish to leave me?' Mortimer asked quietly.

'No-o, Paul. You know I don't, but it is almost unendurable here. You've your work and you can't realize what it means to a woman to be left ——'

'You know the stake we are working for,' Mortimer said inflexibly. 'That means we must both sacrifice something.'

You don't get rich doing things that are easy or that you like. And I shall be rich.'

Evelyn threw out her hands with a gesture of distaste. 'Don't you ever think of anything but money?' she cried.

'Yes. Sometimes,' Mortimer answered dryly and looked at her. His big face was inscrutable. His poise was absolute and his manner studiously restrained. He spoke soothingly, almost as if she were a child, but there was a hint of sternness underlying his words. He could not be driven too far.

'This mood has endured with you for more than a week now,' he said. 'Forgive me if I say that it grows a little wearisome. When we were married two years ago I held nothing from you. I told you precisely how I was situated. I invited you to have a share in my gamble.'

'And was I not equally frank?' she demanded.

'You were,' he answered promptly. 'Neither of us made a pretense of love. I was content to accept you on your own terms, because, well — no matter. It suited my convenience. When I have done what I plan I shall need you more than I do now. But until we reach Highland Avenue in Birmingham you must be content to live my life. Later, when we have served our time, you will be able to live your own.'

His words seemed to fire Evelyn. She sat up and swept back the hair from her face with a passionate gesture. 'But I cannot see why you do not leave here! Surely this place cannot be more attractive to you than to me. Why not go to Birmingham and leave a superintendent here? You could do that much.'

Mortimer met her violet eyes squarely and after a moment they fell before the studious restraint of his black ones. He pulled his chair around to face his wife. His manner was courteous and his tone suave.

'You ask me a reasonable question. I am glad to hear it.

This is the first time. I do not leave here because I cannot afford it. You——'

'But if you can afford to give me ——' She stopped before his uplifted hand.

'One minute. You do not understand my situation here and you must do that to realize why I cannot leave. You have never before shown the slightest interest regarding my business except in its results. I have not wearied you with it, but you ask a question that makes explanations necessary.'

Evelyn sank back in the swing and again set it oscillating. She had recovered her poise and now her calm matched his.

'You seem to find me unreasonable,' she said. 'Perhaps if I knew more I should feel differently.'

'Good.' Mortimer ran a hand over his black hair that burst away from his head. 'I'll start at the beginning. As you know this is a narrow-seam mine. I was able to lease it on a small royalty because with free labor it was unprofitable to work it. But I knew that I could lease convicts. I made sure of that through my political connections in Montgomery. I didn't contribute to Governor Ashmead's campaign fund for nothing. You know Ed Garlock and I ——'

'Yes,' she interrupted. 'I knew that when he was here the other night.'

'Well, convict labor is a bad thing to handle unless you are absolutely sure of marketing your coal, because you have to pay the State whether you sell the coal or not. You can't close down the works as you can in a free mine. But that was an advantage to me; convicts assured me a steady output. There were no fluctuations in production as with free labor. And I didn't have to bother about the unions. That settled my mine problem. I then had to sell my coal. I did and I can place all I can get out up to thirty-five thousand tons a month. They've started a new battery of by-product

ovens in Birmingham and I was lucky enough to sew them up to a long-time contract.'

'Then I don't see——'

'You will in a minute. I still had to step fast to keep my fingers from getting pinched. Take to-day for instance. I've got four hundred convicts leased from the State. I pay the State thirty-six thousand dollars a month for them whether they work or not. That's about twelve hundred dollars a day. Now if the mine is shut down and they don't dig any coal that day, it's my loss and it doesn't take many such days to eat up your profits. Now do you see why I can't leave Alamosa?'

Evelyn was pleased at her own understanding. 'Because you want to see that the mine runs every day.'

'Exactly. Here's my situation. I'm paying the State thirty-six thousand dollars a month for the convicts and it costs me about fourteen thousand dollars a month for royalties and the free labor I use. That makes fifty thousand dollars I've got to produce every month and I cannot take chances with any one else. I must do it myself.'

His voice had grown enthusiastic. His eyes, ordinarily calm, were snapping and his face, usually as placid as Silver Lake and as unreadable, was animated. Evelyn found his enthusiasm contagious.

'But how do you do it?' she cried.

'This is a typical month,' he answered readily. He seemed to find her interest stimulating. 'Call my total expenses fifty thousand dollars. For that I got twenty-five thousand tons of coal. My contract with the by-product ovens calls for steam coal at two dollars a ton and I've got another contract with a yard in Birmingham for all domestic coal at three dollars a ton. I get about seven thousand tons of domestic to eighteen thousand tons of steam. It figures to fifty-seven thousand dollars in round numbers.'

'So that you are making a profit of seven thousand dollars a month!' The figures staggered her. 'I had no idea you were doing so well!'

'All that seven thousand isn't profit.' Mortimer's tone was carefully guarded now. His enthusiasm left him and he was once more cool. 'There are certain other expenditures. But you can call it six thousand a month when I have a good month. That's about seventy thousand dollars a year.'

Mortimer's tone was complacent. Evelyn looked at him speculatively, her eyes a deeper shade of violet in the twilight.

'And what are you going to do with it?'

Mortimer's tone deepened and he spoke half to himself. 'Give me three years more and I'm going to Birmingham and play the coal game as it should be played. I'll have more than three hundred thousand then.'

'Three years!' Evelyn's tone was dismayed. 'Do you mean I must stay here three years longer?'

'Oh, no. You are at perfect liberty to leave at any time you choose,' her husband said suavely. 'You remain because you wish. You'll laugh at this when you live on Highland Avenue.'

'But what am I to do?'

'You'll have to amuse yourself for three years.' Mortimer's tone grew cynical. 'You can do it with money, even in Alamosa.'

'Amuse myself!' Evelyn's tone was startled. She sat up abruptly and looked at him. 'Amuse myself!' She laughed a little. 'I have lots of opportunity for that. When you won't even allow me to drive my own car.'

'One accident is enough,' said Mortimer. There was a hint of iron in his voice, but he spoke calmly. 'You've a speed complex. You are a menace to yourself when you

drive an automobile. But I've arranged that. I'll have a chauffeur for you to-morrow.'

He did not see her scarcely suppressed start. He was looking out into the rose garden where the negro had put away his tools and was now playing the hose on the thirsty flowers. Evelyn turned cautious eyes on her husband.

'A chauffeur. You can't keep one here. He won't stay.'

'This one will.' Mortimer's tone was dry. 'You must have forgotten. I asked Garlock to send up a convict from Madison, when he returned to Montgomery. I got word to-day that the man was coming. He'll be out to-morrow with a gang of transfers.' He rose a trifle impatiently. 'Isn't dinner about ready? I'll go bathe.'

Behind him Evelyn Mortimer sank back among the cushions of the lounge and set it swinging again. Her face was no longer discontented. She even smiled a little as she threw back her head and gazed out into the twilight.

CHAPTER III

INSIDE the stockade the July sun poured down. Across the level yard, the whitewashed walls of the prison did a devil's-dance in the shimmering heat that seemed to strike the hard-packed earth and rebound. Cut off by the ten-foot board fence, not a breath of air stirred to ease the sun's fierceness and there was neither grass nor trees to relieve the merciless glare.

Carole had gone into the squat little structure just inside the main gate of the prison without troubling to unshackle the men and they stood in a double file and sweated and cursed and gasped in the sun.

John Ogletree, his left arm handcuffed to Gid Ames's right, shut his lips in a thin line and said nothing. His eyes were closed to mere slits against the terrific power of the sun. He looked about him with fierce hate.

'Madison was better than this,' he growled.

'Don't you go gittin' homesick f'r Madison a'ready,' Ames answered. 'You know what I tole you. Kind of make up yore mind to git used to it. Don't do a mite of good to buck.'

Ogletree turned his eyes on him for a moment. 'I'm wise,' he said shortly. 'I learned that much at Madison. I'm not going to buck, but that doesn't keep me from hating the place.'

'Hatin's a awful bilious complaint. Don't make this here place no easier. It ain't gonna be this hot in the mine.'

Ogletree shrugged faintly. 'I'm not going in the mine. You wait and see.'

'Don't pr'pose to argy with you. When they gives you

yore pick, jus' remember what I said. I'll help you all I kin.'

Ogletree laughed; discreetly as convicts do. 'Still set on taking me under your wing, are you?'

'I be. I just naturally gotta have somebody. I hope we gits in the same cell wing, but you never kin tell. Ain't much luck in a place like this.'

Behind them the negroes had laid their bundles on the ground and were talking among themselves with an occasional burst of laughter. They did not mind the heat. Their black faces, shiny with perspiration, were cheerful and they grinned amiably at each other.

Ogletree drew a sleeve across his damp face and swallowed to clear his throat of the dust that had settled on him in his march from the railroad junction at Climax. The four-mile tramp had left him weary. At Madison there had been scant opportunity for exercise and his muscles were flabby. He was thirsty and weary.

He pulled at the chain and swore fretfully. 'Damn him! he might have taken these off. We're inside.'

'Don't mean nothin' to him,' Ames drawled. 'What you expect?' His throat worked and a tiny lump ran up and down his long neck as he swallowed. His blue eyes, bright and beady in deep-set sockets, turned about him and he nodded to himself. 'Ain't changed a mite,' he announced. 'Yonder's the horspital.'

He looked toward a small cottage set in one corner of the stockade. It was as plain and bare as the other buildings, which were dominated by the huge bulk of the main prison structure, set almost in the center of the five acres enclosed by the towering board fence. Ogletree could sense only the bareness of it and the overpowering heat. He began to feel faint . . . his tongue seemed thick . . . Ames was speaking.

'I was six weeks in that there horspital. Got my leg all

tangled up under some rock down in the mine. I wonder if he's still there. I shore hope to God he is.'

'Who?' Ogletree's question was idle.

'Doctor David Richie. That's shore one man you wants to git 'quainted with right away. He kin save you more hell 'n any other two men here, not 'ceptin' Blood Keller.'

Ogletree only half heard him. He was busy scanning the prison where he would spend five years unless some kindly fate intervened and he did not believe in such things — now. He had lost that in the bitterness of his first years at Madison.

The place was bare enough in all conscience. A huge pile of a building in the shape of a plus sign stood in the center of the stockade. At the angles long steps led up to barred doors. In one corner of the enclosure was the hospital; he stood before the warden's office and the main administration building of the prison. Behind one corner of the barracks he could see what he guessed to be the tool house and beside it the bakery. And that was all. The buildings were of pine board and he could see the rosin and turpentine frying out of them under the sun. Not even the whitewash could stop that.

He was roused from his reverie by a nudge from Ames. He became conscious of a sudden tension about him as the line of convicts straightened despite their weariness.

'That's him,' whispered Ames, pointing.

John looked and saw a dapper little man, nattily dressed, trousers in a knife-crease, his hose purple and his hair plastered close to his head. So much John caught in one quick look. Could this be Blood Keller? His thoughts were rather contemptuous. He knew the type — the mining-camp dandy dressed in cheap finery. Many times he had seen them in Birmingham.

That was his first thought and then he saw Keller's face in

the full revealing glare of the sun. The man's features were lighted up with some inward convulsion. His tongue passed over his thin lips and his hands tapped the door lintel beside him.

The tableau was unbroken for a moment. Ed Carole was too wise to interrupt. Many times before had he watched Keller gloat at the sight of helpless men. Keller received convicts exultingly; he saw them go regretfully; he dealt out freedom parsimoniously. The knowledge that he held these men's lives and their comfort in his hands always excited in him an ecstasy of pleasure. It was the call of blood to the tiger.

Ogletree did not know this, but he saw the light of unbridled ferocity in Keller's face and quailed a little. Even his courage was not proof against the menace of this neat little figure, and after all . . . a convict . . . helpless . . . at the mercy of whatever whim the man before him might feel.

After that one paroxysm of delight, Keller became impassive save for the relishful eyes. He seemed to be savoring the men; each felt the measure of his gaze and even the light-hearted negroes fell silent and stared up with frightened countenances.

This survey from the door of his office was an unbroken routine of the receipt of new drafts of convicts. Carole was accustomed to it by now. He waited until Keller turned to him and spoke melodiously.

'Turn them loose, Mr. Carole, and send them in one at a time. I have their cards.'

Carole unlocked the shackles that bound the men to the chain. This he restored to his little black satchel against another such trip from Madison. Then, one by one, he sent the convicts into Keller's office.

Still under the baleful spell of his presence there was little

talk as the men waited. John measured the stockade with his eye. What manner of place was this? The towering fence was studded with pent-houses inside which men leaned on rifles, their faces turned inward in constant vigilance. Every hundred yards were these sentry towers, while built directly over the main entrance was the guard house where the yard sergeant had his headquarters.

At last it came John's turn to enter. If he was daunted his dark face hid it as he paused before Keller's desk. The office was in keeping with its master; meticulously neat; scrupulously clean; no film of dust; no disordered papers. The desk Keller faced was bare save for a glass inkstand and a single pen. About the room in orderly rows were steel filing cabinets. From an inside door came the clatter of a typewriter. In a rack behind Keller leaned rifles, stubby, wicked-looking guns, each with a bandolier of steel-jacketed cartridges hanging from the barrel.

Keller waited patiently until John's eyes came back to him. Then he spoke politely.

'Name, please?'

'Ogletree, sir. John Ogletree. Number 17,468.'

Keller shuffled the cards before him and then paused. 'H-m. All A's, I see. Good record. Embezzlement. Seven years. Jefferson County.' He looked up at John. 'You have a good record. Clerical work at Madison?'

'Yes, sir.'

Keller shook his head. 'I'm afraid we are full up with clerks here.'

John remembered Ames's warning. For a moment fear of the mine shook him. He admitted to himself that he was afraid of the mine. His bravado with Ames had grown from his confidence that he would not be sent to dig coal. He knew the futility of protest and spurred his courage with hate. So engrossed was he with his thoughts that he did not

see the man beside Keller until the warden turned to him with John's card extended.

'Well?'

The man, big and black-haired, with sharp black eyes above a close-cropped black mustache, took the card and scanned it for a moment. Then he looked at Ogletree.

'What were you before you were sent to prison?'

'A lawyer.'

'In Birmingham?'

'Yes.'

'Sir,' suggested Keller musically.

John flushed. 'A lawyer, sir.'

'Ever drive an automobile?'

'Yes, sir.'

'In Birmingham?'

'Yes, sir.'

Paul Mortimer tossed the card back. 'Send him through,' he said. 'I suppose Garlock knew what he was doing.'

'Wait outside with the others,' Keller directed, and John returned to the blistering heat of the yard. Ames followed him inside, but did not remain long.

'They knowed Gideon Ames,' he chuckled grimly to John. 'They ain't forgot when I was here afore.'

When the last man had returned to the group, Keller came to the door and blew the whistle that dangled from a leather strap about his neck. A guard, trailing a rifle, came up from the yard sergeant's office at a trot. Keller waved at the waiting convicts.

'Bunk them, take them over to Dr. Richie to be classified and get them ready to go down to-morrow,' he ordered. 'Have them issued check numbers and assigned hooks in the wash room. See the quartermaster for mine clothes.'

At the heels of the guard they marched to the barracks, where they mounted to the third floor and came into a wing

filled with long rows of iron cots, a six-foot aisle between them.

The stevedore who sat at the desk in the angle where the four wings of the building joined assigned them to bunks, which were arranged in pairs.

Again John looked about him. This was different from Madison. There were iron doors at each wing and all windows were covered with a lattice-work of steel. The roof was low and inside the building the heat was a palpable thing. John winced at the thought of it. Even the closeness of Madison was preferable to this. There they had been housed in concrete that made the heat endurable.

John was given a cot and a moment later Ames was assigned one close by. The men unpacked their bags and the stevedore showed them how to arrange their scanty effects.

'This barracks is inspected every mornin' an' you gotta have yore things just so 'r Mister Keller raises hell,' he explained. 'That there box at the head of yore bunk is f'r yore little stuff, you keeps yore spare clothes in that there bag and yore shoes under the foot of the bunk. Yore dishes you keeps on top of that there box.'

John arranged his few belongings. The others did likewise while the stevedore coached them and changed John's tin plate, knife, fork, spoon, and cup to its proper position.

'Mister Keller is strick as hell on that,' he explained. 'He'll dock you a ton if you don't have yore stuff right an' sometimes he does more'n that.'

Ames looked at John and his eyes were significant. The stevedore worked with them until the bunks and the boxes were arranged to his satisfaction. Then he nodded to the guard.

'Take 'em over to the hospital,' he ordered.

As they clumped down the steps, Ames ranged alongside

John. 'Make yore play for Doctor David,' he whispered. 'Gonta need him. He kin help you.'

'How?'

'He says whether you kin go in the mine or not an' how much coal you gotta dig and when you kin work and what kin' of work you does.'

John smiled cynically. 'He can, I guess, but that won't do us any good.'

'Yes, it will. Don't you go gittin' the wrong notion 'bout Doctor David. Son, you gotta have some sort of friend in this here place.'

'To hell with friends,' John answered curtly. 'I'll sink or swim without them.'

'You don't mean me?' The question was almost wistful.

John repented at the sight of the man's hurt. 'No. I didn't,' he said impulsively. Ames's face brightened and John went on. 'What in the name of God you see in me I don't know, but if you like we'll call us a pair.'

'You mean we're buddies!'

'Yes.'

'Hot dam! Just like a drink of water. Now you go on in an' make up to Doctor David.' He squeezed John's arm surreptitiously and John was a little ashamed at the man's frank liking. He had never met anything like it before. And suddenly he grew suspicious. Was not Ames over-friendly? Surely he should know better than to be deceived again at the first proffer of friendship. He had paid bitterly enough for his knowledge. His lips twisted into a sneer at the thought and he reached a cynical resolve. From Ames he would take what he could and give nothing in return.

The group halted at a word from the guard. 'You boys ain't never been here before. See that there wire?' He pointed to a strand stretched breast high twenty feet inside the stockade fence and extending the entire circumference

of the huge enclosure. 'That there's the dead line. They depends more on that than they do on them bars back yonder. Don't none of you get closer to the fence than that there wire. They shoots first an' talks atterward when you do.'

They halted at the hospital steps. From inside came the smell of antiseptics. On the porch sat the black-haired man who had questioned John in Keller's office. He beckoned to him now.

'You need not go into the hospital. It will not be necessary to classify you, for you are not going into the mine. Come with me.'

He turned on his heel and John followed him. His eyes were triumphant as they met Gid Ames's blue ones. The man's grizzled face was alight with a smile. He raised his clasped hands and smiled at John and, in the warmth of it, John smiled back. Then he followed Paul Mortimer toward the main gate of the prison.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN OGLETREE'S feelings were mixed as he walked behind Paul Mortimer across the stockade toward the yard sergeant's hut above the main gate. He was not unaware of what was coming, but he did not understand it. He knew he was destined for some service outside the prison and, remembering Mortimer's questions in Keller's office, guessed that it had to do with automobiles.

For a moment anger shook him. Dog robber! He mouthed the words contemptuously. A — a servant! It was a galling price for ease and security. Then the ironic humor of his scruples struck him and he smiled. He had a certain number of days to spend in this place. Did it matter what work he did so that the hours might increase their pace? Hardly! He shrugged his shoulders and eyed Mortimer's broad back indifferently. Anything was better than labor below the surface where the darkness hid many things of which he had heard terrible whispers.

That man at the hospital who had been at this very mine. They flogged them here and —— Thus he consoled himself with the thought of what he was escaping, but a disquieting question remained. Ogletree had been in prison more than two years and he was observant. He had seen the operation of the convict system even if he had fought shy of it and sought no favor save isolation.

Why had he thus been favored with Mortimer's attention? Though he had sneered at Ames's words, he knew the truth of them. The favors of light work and easy hours were not given thus freely out of the generosity of a kindly heart. Hardly! He was penniless; friendless; outside the prison he

had dropped unnoticed from his world. Yet he had been chosen. Why? He shook his head and gave it up as Mortimer paused under the yard sergeant's window and called out.

The sergeant thrust out his head and withdrew it quickly when he saw who called, hurrying out on the platform in front of the open door. John watched idly, his mind still puzzled. Take Beaulon now; a fat little banker from Mobile. At Madison he had been almost a guest of the warden; but there was a reason for that. The prison knew and it whispered from cell to cell . . . The warden at Madison drove a four-thousand-dollar limousine; his salary was two hundred dollars a month. The prison was not slow to understand.

'Lord, but he's still got the jack. And he don't mind spendin' it.' This of Beaulon.

'You wouldn't neither if you'd of got it like he did.'

'Yeah. Guess so. The Cap'n must be nickin' him for a hundred a week.'

'Easy. But he ain't keepin' it all. Others itch besides him.'

Mortimer glanced up at the yard sergeant and pointed at Ogletree. 'This man is a trusty, working for me outside. Take a good look at him and pass him in and out whenever it is necessary.'

'Yes, sir. I'll tell all the boys. He won't have no trouble on the gate.'

Mortimer nodded to John and the big gates opened to the lever Crandall pulled in the hut above them. Outside the stockade Mortimer paused and looked John over. Under his gaze the convict straightened to immobility; hands at his side, head erect, eyes steadily in front of him.

'Did Mr. Garlock talk to you before he sent you?'

John hid his wonder. Garlock was the head of the state convict department, but he had never seen him. He shook his head. 'No, sir.'

Mortimer frowned. 'Did any one tell you what you were to do here?'

'I was told nothing, sir. Merely that I had been transferred to Alamosa.'

'Very well. It wasn't necessary, but I thought perhaps that Mr. Garlock might have —— No matter. You understand that you are to work for me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What did you do at Madison?'

'I kept the records of the shirt factory and the cotton mill.'

'No outside work?'

'None, sir.'

'Then why did Garlock send you here?'

'I do not know.'

Mortimer debated for a moment, his dark face slightly overcast. Then it cleared as he reached a decision. 'Oh, well, perhaps he thought you deserved it. But I'm a little puzzled. However —— You are to drive my car and Mrs. Mortimer's.'

'Very well, sir.'

Mortimer looked at him and his face was not unkind when he spoke again: but there was a clipped brusqueness to his speech that showed he was conscious to whom he spoke.

'Your duties will not be unpleasant. Whether you continue with me depends entirely upon yourself. It should be a pleasant change from what you have been doing. From your speech I judge that you have intelligence and education. I prefer that kind; but don't presume on it.'

'Yes, sir.'

For a moment Mortimer appeared to consider speaking further and then thought better of it. 'Come with me,' he said and turned on his heel.

They skirted one corner of the stockade along the shore of Silver Lake. Mortimer did not glance aside, but John Ogle-

tree was strangely stirred by what he saw. The sun was low and its crimson rays turned the waters to deep vermilion and painted the small island in the lake to an azure glory. On the far shore the shadows of the trees that grew down to the banks turned the water black and it shaded away to delicate violet.

Behind them John could see the scaffolding of the tippie, garish despite the softened light. A breeze came off the lake, and remembering the oven of the barracks he faced it gratefully. Before them he saw a bungalow, different from the other houses that dotted the lake-shore, and guessed it to be Mortimer's home — as it was.

Mortimer led the way around the house and paused at the sight of a woman sitting on the rear steps, her chin in her hands, her eyes looking out across the hills, where range succeeded range in purple outline against the sky.

'Hello, Selma. Is Evelyn here?'

'Yes, Mr. Mortimer. She is upstairs.'

'Is she feeling better?'

The woman's lips lifted in the suggestion of a smile. 'Yes. It was nothing serious.'

Mortimer muttered under his breath as he looked at his watch. 'I wonder if she would like to go for a ride.'

'I don't know. Shall I ask her?'

'No. I will.' Then to John: 'Wait here.'

John's eyes strayed to the woods and he remembered Ames's wistful words. The spell of the purple hillsides tugged faintly at him, but his thoughts did not linger. Once more he wondered at his good fortune. Under the blue denim shirt his shoulders moved in a faint shrug. There was a price tag attached. Perhaps he had better save his gratulation until he saw what was demanded in return.

His eyes wandered to the neat garage set far back from the house. Two cars. Were there two chauffeurs? He might

have a companion. His lips curled at the thought; he preferred isolation. It was the one thing that made the prospect endurable.

After a time he became conscious of the woman on the steps and his eyes rested on her incuriously. Women had no place in his life and not even the faint odor of jasmine brought by a vagrant breeze could stir his nerves from their lethargy.

But John Ogletree was a convict and cautious. Warned by some inner sense, he looked closer, his gaze impersonal. Obviously she had some part in the prison administration: of that he was sure. Then she was important to him because she was a potential menace. All people not convicts are that in a prison. Long since John Ogletree had learned this bitter truth.

The woman was half turned from him and he could see only one oval cheek framed in masses of dark hair gathered loosely and piled high on a head set daintily on shoulders that were not broad but sturdy rather.

She was older then he had thought, he decided. Now that he paid heed he saw lines.

John lost himself in his speculations and awoke with a start to find her looking directly at him. Instinctively he straightened, for her gaze was not friendly and he found the blue eyes in the olive face disconcerting. He flushed, but did not look away. Her eyes were fringed by long black lashes and her brows were without curve, giving her face a severity belied by the wide mouth and the finely chiseled nose. After a moment she spoke, her words as direct as her glance from under the level brows.

‘Why do you look at me like that?’

Her voice was modulated, low, soft, and yet with a timbre that made each word distinct. She spoke with the ease of complete confidence. Despite the softness of her tone, her

words were curt, her question a demand, not a request. When John hesitated, she spoke again, a hint of impatience increasing the sharpness of her voice.

‘Why do you look at me like that?’

‘I — I beg your pardon. I did not mean to be offensive.’ She made him feel more a convict than had Keller’s assumed courtesy or Mortimer’s brusque disregard.

She seemed struck by his tone and looked at him closely. ‘I am not offended. Merely curious. Tell me.’

Should he tell her? Words stumbled on John’s tongue. ‘I — I was just wondering — just thinking. That was all.’

Her blue eyes chilled and the level brows drew down a little. She spoke peremptorily. ‘Tell me what you were thinking of me.’

‘I — I ——’ John still hesitated, but when she turned her eyes on him again, he plunged forward recklessly under the spur of her look. ‘I was wondering what you would have to do with me here — what part you would play in the prison.’

Her eyes took him in from head to foot. They were cold and inwardly John quivered a little. He felt the force of her personality and wondered what such a woman did in a convict mining camp. ‘You are a convict?’ she asked at last.

‘Why — yes.’ He indicated his white canvas suit. ‘Certainly. Of course.’

‘Why?’

‘You mean what did I do?’

‘Yes.’

‘Embezzlement was what they sentenced me for.’

She scanned him again. ‘In a bank, wasn’t it? Or perhaps a cashier somewhere ——’

‘No,’ he said briefly. He was uncomfortable, fearful of offending, yet reluctant to answer. He wanted to get away. Her cool eyes he thought held the same faint gleam of sar-

donic humor they had revealed when she had spoken of Mrs. Mortimer. Yet he did not know how to avoid her direct questions.

'Innocent, I suppose.' Her sarcasm was unmistakable and his resentment made his answer dry.

'No. Guilty.'

'Oh!' The black brows went up. Then: 'You have only just come?'

'Yes.'

'You were wondering, you said. I am Selma Richie.' The name meant nothing to him and at his blank stare she explained. 'I work with my father at the hospital. Dr. Richie, you know. I am his surgical nurse. You are to be the Mortimer chauffeur?'

'So Mr. Mortimer said.'

'Do you understand why?' Again his look answered her and an unpleasant smile broke up the wintry look in her eyes. 'You will find out soon enough.'

Behind them there was the sound of voices and he heard Mortimer's crisp tones. Selma Ritchie rose leisurely and her eyes swept him again, cool, unfriendly; contemptuous he would have thought had he estimated his importance so highly. Selma spoke deliberately from the steps.

'I have a warning for you. Paul Mortimer is not easily blinded. I am saying this for her, not for you.'

'I don't understand what you——' John began, but, heedless of his bewilderment, she turned to greet Mortimer and John smoothed his face.

'Evelyn will be ready in a moment,' Mortimer said. 'We will drop you at your home if you like, Selma. Evelyn has your wrap.'

'Thank you, Mr. Mortimer,' and she went inside. Her blue eyes were still unfriendly as they swept John for an instant. He thought they repeated her warning. If it were

true, it was wasted. He had no inkling of her meaning. Mortimer led the way to the red-roofed garage at the rear of the house. The doors were opened and John saw two polished cars in the stalls.

'The roadster is mine and the sedan Mrs. Mortimer's,' Mortimer explained. 'Bring out the big car and let me see how you handle it.'

John slid into the upholstered seat. 'Standard shift, sir?' he asked and Mortimer nodded. John stepped on the starter and the motor instantly began to purr. Carefully he drifted backward until the front bumper cleared the door and then tooled the huge machine around until it faced the front.

Mortimer nodded his satisfaction. 'Good. I'm glad to see you've handled big cars before. There's a lot of difference between a large car and a small one. I didn't think Garlock would have sent me a dub. Drive around to the front.'

Mortimer got in beside him and John circled the driveway and halted beside the steps. As he drew up, two women came out the front door. One of them was Selma Richie and the other . . . He stared unbelievably.

It was Evelyn Carruthers!

His hands gripped the wheel until his knuckles were white, but the repression taught by months of iron discipline did not desert him. He gave no outward evidence of the chaos within him.

Evelyn! Here! Mortimer's wife! For an instant his eyes blurred. It was inconceivable! Fantastic! The crowning irony!

He forced himself to calmness. It could not matter to him. But, God! what humiliation! To meet her like this! Then bitterness came to his aid. The past could have no connection with him now. Evelyn Mortimer was as definitely out of his life as Dial Chesland. But even then, to see her—to

face recognition —— He stared straight ahead, his eyes narrowed, his face white.

Evelyn was laughing when she came down the flagged walk and stepped into the car with Selma Richie. She glanced impersonally at John Ogletree and there was no recognition in her face.

'Here is your chauffeur,' Mortimer said. 'Now you and Selma can drive all you like. We're going to test him now.'

Evelyn eyed John's canvas clothes distastefully. 'We-ell, there's one thing I shall change if he is to drive us. I don't want him dressed like that. I won't have it advertised that my driver is a convict. What do you say, Selma?'

Selma's deliberate words were in decided contrast with Evelyn Mortimer's vivacious tones. 'I am accustomed to it now.'

'That is not difficult to change,' Mortimer's deep voice broke in. 'I will consider myself fortunate if that is your only objection. Send him up to the commissary and let him get a new outfit. I'll arrange with Keller.'

They were still standing before the door. John looked around; his voice was flat. 'Where to, sir?'

'Will you go with us, Selma? Or shall we drop you now?'

Evelyn laid a quick hand on Selma's knee to second her husband's invitation, but Selma shook her head. 'I must be home before father. He insists on that. Just let me out as you pass.'

Mortimer turned to John. 'Follow this road around the stockade and then turn to the left. I will tell you when to stop.'

John drove carefully for all his inward turmoil. Behind him Evelyn chatted lightly.

'You have saved my life,' she said to Selma in exaggerated gratitude. 'I would expire from utter boredom if it were not for you. When are you coming to see me again?'

Selma's answer came deliberately. 'I'll slip away again soon. I still have a lot to say to you.' It seemed to John that her words were meaning, 'I'll come back whenever father doesn't need me at the hospital. A surgical nurse, you know, must be within reach at all times. I'm on duty twenty-four hours a day.'

'Come as often as you can, Selma,' Mortimer urged, his voice losing none of its brusqueness. 'It is good for Evelyn. Living here is rather difficult for her and anything that relieves it places me under obligation.'

By now they were leaving the stockade behind and the small houses were becoming sparser. Mortimer pointed to a small white cottage shielded by rows of small cypress trees, the knees of which were utilized as seats. 'Stop there,' he ordered.

John obeyed mechanically. His thoughts were not on what he did, but of Evelyn Mortimer. The last time he had seen her was before . . . He had never expected to see her again. Indeed, in the bitterness that had become his constant companion he had scarcely thought of her in two years. But the sight of her brought flooding back memories of past days; memories that turned his face saturnine and brought a sardonic twist to his thin lips.

He had recovered by now. He was clay in the hand of circumstance. Of what use to struggle! Only it was ironical that she should be Mortimer's wife and that he of all convicts in Alabama should have been chosen . . . He was roused by Mortimer's order. 'Drive on.'

Evelyn waved to Selma as the car drew away and Selma lifted her hand in answer. From the corner of his eye, John could see her, the wind whipping her skirts about her and outlining her figure. Why had she been so instantly unfriendly? John wondered, but dismissed her quickly. There were other things to think of.

'Drive around the lake,' said Mortimer. 'You'll find that the road will bring you back into Alamosa. Go slowly. We are in no hurry.'

John imagined that he felt Evelyn's eyes on him and grew hot with humiliation. He forced his attention on the road before him and closed his ears as best he could to the talk that went on behind him. But he could not be deaf and he heard Evelyn Mortimer's voice.

'Garlock did not wait long, did he?'

'Garlock and I understand each other,' her husband said quietly. 'We are each of value to the other.'

'I know,' agreed Evelyn. 'You told me. But aren't you being rather trusting?'

'About him?' They appeared oblivious of John, discussing him as calmly as if he were one of the huge cypress trees that threatened to engulf the road. 'Garlock would not send me a man who was not competent. It isn't as if I had simply picked him from the draft. He was chosen for me and you remember how I cautioned Garlock when he was here.'

Evelyn assumed indifference. 'I am satisfied if you are. But I have never gotten accustomed to having convicts under foot. I never feel absolutely safe.'

'Nonsense. You can depend on a trusty. He has everything to gain and nothing to lose when he is a man of this class. Escape is useless and if he slips he goes into the mines. They don't slip.'

'Oh, very well then. I am free to use my car now?'

'Yes. But let him do the driving. You have a speed complex, Evelyn, and it isn't safe to trust you.'

They fell silent, and John drove slowly around the lake that was perhaps half a mile across. He felt Mortimer's eyes on him. They came to a turn of the road.

'You may stop here a moment,' said Mortimer.

John drew the car to the roadside and halted. All three

gazed across the lake to where the prison buildings were softened in the haze of the late afternoon.

'I think he will do. Don't you?' Mortimer nodded toward Ogletree.

'Yes. He seems familiar with the car.' Evelyn's tone was placid. 'Let's go back.'

At the word Ogletree eased into first and rolled off. Behind him the man and woman were silent or spoke only of commonplace things.

'Drop me at the stockade,' Mortimer ordered. 'I must see Keller before I come down for supper. Evelyn, I am satisfied with the man. Are you?'

'Perfectly.'

John stopped before the stockade gate and Mortimer got out. 'Drive Mrs. Mortimer home,' he said. 'She will tell you what she wishes then.'

John drove away. He was rather proud of his steadiness. Abruptly he withdrew into himself; sinking his consciousness and reserving only sufficient to drive. What now? Would she recognize him? Would she speak banal words of pity? Refer to the past? He writhed at the thought. Then he straightened his face and forced himself to calmness. Hell! to feel it so after all these years was childish! This was merely a masquerade — a necessary preliminary to the future.

He paused at the front door of the Mortimer home, but the woman spoke quietly. 'Drive around to the garage. We shall not want the car again to-night. You may put it up.'

So! She did not intend to know him! Well, he had hardly expected it. It was in keeping with what he had known of her before. And he was not sorry. He was glad to have it so.

When he stopped, the woman did not get out. Instead she leaned forward and touched him on the shoulder.

'Aren't you going to recognize me, John?'

CHAPTER V

OGLETREE turned for a long, deliberate look before he answered. He met her eyes squarely and the half-ironic light in their violet depths was a trifle disquieting. He laughed shortly.

‘How could I help it — Mrs. Mortimer?’ His pause before her name was meant to be significant.

Evelyn stretched luxuriously and smoothed the velour of the seat with slim fingers. Her eyes glimmered at him as they narrowed when she smiled.

‘It isn’t necessary to be formal,’ she said and waited, but he sat silent. ‘Well?’ she asked at last. Still John did not speak. ‘Aren’t you going to say the obvious? That it’s a small world and you’re glad to see me?’

‘Hardly!’

She laughed softly at his brevity. ‘You are glad to see me, aren’t you?’

‘No.’

Her brows went up. ‘You are not as courteous as you were. You should be glad.’

‘That you are here? I fail to see it.’ His tone was dry. ‘What possible interest can it have for me?’

‘More than you think, but that can wait. It is necessary first that we understand each other. I said that you need not be formal. I meant it. This’ — she gestured toward his convict garb — ‘this makes no difference to me.’

‘How kind!’ He was ironical. ‘Unfortunately I cannot say as much.’

She leaned forward and touched him again. John shrank from her hand, but it did not reach the surface. ‘Don’t be

difficult, John. There's no need of being sensitive with me.'

'Sensitive!' Again there was irony in his laugh. 'I'm not sensitive — only sensible.'

'You are making it hard for me to say what I wish. It is not necessary —'

John's bitterness conquered him for a moment. 'Oh, for God's sake!' he cried between his teeth. 'Do you know what you are doing to me? Tell me what you wish and get it done! Can't you understand that seeing you like this ——' Abruptly he subsided; the fire died out of his eyes. 'I beg your pardon! I forgot myself. I shall not do so again. It was rather a shock, though, seeing you after these years.'

'I know, I should have prepared you for it, but I did not dare.'

There was unexpected softness in her voice and her eyes were sympathetic as she looked at him. John drew a sleeve across his face that had become haggard. Then he grasped the meaning of her words.

'Prepare me for it! How could you ——'

'I said that it was necessary for us to understand each other. Forget yourself for a moment. You needn't be self-conscious with me. I only want to help you.'

'Well, that ——' John began and then closed his lips on the ungracious speech. He was winning back his self-possession; his bitterness was flooding him again. She was a part of the old life that was gone, but she could still be of aid to him. If she wanted to help he would be a fool to antagonize her. Why should he not —— He smoothed his face. 'I do not understand,' he said.

'You couldn't until I explain. That is what I am trying to do. You see, I didn't dare try to communicate with you before you were sent here and I was forced to depend on your discretion not to betray yourself when you saw me.'

'You knew I was coming here?'

'Of course. I had you chosen for this place.'

'You had it done! And you call that helping?'

'Yes.' She nodded with more animation than she had shown yet. 'Don't you think so?'

'No,' he answered bluntly. 'I think the kindest thing you could have done was to have left me at Madison. There, at least, I was not reminded of what I had been.'

'And are you so anxious to forget?' Her question was quite matter-of-fact.

'Yes.'

She found the monosyllable more eloquent than vehement speech. 'Everything?' she persisted.

'Everything. That's done. I'm through with it. It's a river that I can't cross back.' He laughed mirthlessly. 'I don't know that I'm even anxious to try. I haven't begun really to consider what I will do when I get out, but it will be different anyway.'

'There are still many things that I do not know,' she observed. 'That will come later. Now I must explain about my part. But I don't believe you are sincere. You can keep the best of the past and let the rest of it go. Perhaps I did interfere, but you'll find that you will benefit.'

'Since it is done, why discuss it?' he asked calmly. 'I suppose you asked your husband to help you?'

Evelyn smiled pityingly. 'Is it likely that I would?' she gestured indifferently. 'It wasn't hard. A little artistic lying and it was done with no one the wiser.'

He looked at her curiously and for the first time there was a personal note in his voice. 'There are others who have changed.'

'We live and learn. I've learned a good bit. But about getting you here, that was absurdly simple. Mr. Garlock was here for dinner one night and he and Paul were going

over a roster of state prisoners. Paul was selecting the men he wanted and Mr. Garlock was telling him which were best. They went up to the mine and I happened to see your name on the list. That was the first time I had heard of — of anything happening. I could hardly believe it, but the names could not have been a coincidence so I knew that you — you ——’

‘Say it. I’m not sensitive.’ John spoke harshly. ‘You knew that I was a convict. What then?’

‘It was easy. I knew that Paul planned to bring a man here to drive our cars, and while he was out of the room I asked Mr. Garlock to send you and to say nothing to Paul.’

‘I see. And he agreed without any explanations?’

‘Oh, I explained. That was where the fairy tale began. I told him you were a cousin and that I wanted to help you, but had been afraid to speak to Paul about it. I was very pathetic.’ She looked at him sidewise for a moment and laughed a little, but there was no answering lightness in his face. ‘I even wept a little and Mr. Garlock promised that he — he would see that you were sent here when Paul asked for his chauffeur. And here you are.’

John’s mouth tightened and he seemed still to be waiting. ‘Is that all?’ he asked at last.

‘Why, yes. What else could there be?’

‘Why you did it.’

‘Why, to help you, of course!’

John half-turned from her and his eyes went out across Silver Lake that was dark and mysterious now in the shadows of the trees along the bank. They seemed to hover over the still waters. Above the lake a hawk wheeled on effortless wings. He wondered at her lingering in the car; at her readiness to talk with him. He had not the key to her actions yet. On the steering-wheel his hands gripped tight, but he turned and spoke calmly enough.

'You — you rather puzzle me,' he said deliberately. 'I'm afraid I'm a little skeptical.'

'About me?' Her voice chilled. 'And why, pray?'

'Consider for a moment. When you knew me I was a lawyer in Birmingham. I had good prospects, social standing — in a word, everything that I haven't now. Then I loved you. Oh, it's past and I can speak of it. I was wild about you, but you — Well, I suppose you had your eyes fixed on bigger game. Anyway, you made it quite plain that it would be useless for me to speak, so I saved you the pain of telling me that I did not measure up to your standards. That was when I had everything.' He threw out his hands in an unconscious gesture of bewilderment.

Evelyn was leaning forward, her eyes fixed on his, her hands clasped loosely in her lap. She spoke quietly:

'Are you pleading that as an excuse for — being here?'

He matched her calmness. 'By no means. But it is one of the things that puzzles me about this unexpected solicitude of yours — this sudden desire to help. Then you would have none of me. Now, when I am a convict — a thief —'

'A thief, John?'

'Yes, a thief. I took money that was not mine. I'm not pretending I was innocent. If I did or were, I could understand you better. But now when — when I am as I am, you interest yourself in me. I do not flatter myself that it is from any sentimental reason and if I may be frank I do not find it welcome.'

'You are suspicious?'

He lifted his hands and let them drop. 'Well, yes. If you wish to put it that way, I am.'

'You have no need to be.'

'A convict is always suspicious of what he doesn't understand, and while you tell me to forget that I am a convict, it isn't put off quite so lightly.'

‘Did it ever occur to you that I might honestly want to help you because I remembered you kindly? Don’t you think that I might have found myself genuinely interested in a person who did me the honor at one time——’

He struck into her speech rudely. She had spoken earnestly, but stopped abruptly at his tone of derisive incredulity.

‘If that is what you wish me to believe, of course I shall. And you need not complete it. I know the remainder.’

‘Oh!’ Her gasp was involuntary. ‘But you are bitter.’

‘Of course I’m bitter, but you have nothing to do with that. It does not concern you. Do you think it wise to talk with me so long?’

She glanced about her indifferently. It was almost dark. Across Silver Lake lights twinkled. He knew them for lamps in the caps of miners trudging homeward after their work. The heat of the day was tempered by a breeze that had sprung up. He looked back to find her smiling at him.

‘You need not be afraid. I shall not involve you in further difficulties. Paul will not be home from the office for an hour yet and there are things I still wish to know.’

‘Very well.’ His tone of resignation brought a flush to her cheeks.

‘I’m going to help you whether you like it or not.’

He looked at her curiously. ‘What is there about me that makes you think I need help? You are the second person who has said that to me to-day. I am quite able to care for myself. I prefer it that way.’

Again her quiet smile was disconcerting. ‘Still, it pleases me to play Lady Bountiful,’ she said. ‘Perhaps I am bored. Perhaps I find the situation diverting. Perhaps I wish to be amused. You can assign any motive you choose.’

‘I shall not trouble myself. I long ago ceased to wonder

about things that I did not understand. It doesn't make any difference. I'm helpless, anyway.'

'Yes,' she agreed. 'Perhaps that is why I find the situation so entertaining.'

'I begin to understand.' John's tone was curt, but she refused to recognize his resentment.

'You'll get over feeling like that,' she said quietly. 'Anyway, you won't be entirely without benefit. This is better than the mines. There are things I wish to know.'

'Ask them, of course.'

'How did you come to make your mistake?'

John waited so long to answer that she turned her eyes on him wonderingly and was startled at the change in his face. His eyes were bleak and his mouth drawn down into grim lines. His nostrils pinched in and he breathed deeply. It seemed to her that he was poised where he sat. 'You never knew Dial Chesland, did you?'

'No.'

'Dial Chesland was my friend — once.' His voice was lowered. He spoke almost in a whisper; there was a thin little rasping note in his words and Evelyn shivered. 'He was my client as well as my friend. He had sued a coal company for a breach of contract and we won the verdict. There was talk of an appeal, but I knew that they would not. They didn't have a leg to stand on and they knew it. Chesland was leaving to be gone for months and he signed a release so that when the money was paid, as I was certain it would be, it was paid to me.'

'And you used part of it?'

'All of it,' he corrected emotionlessly. 'I had an inside tip on a land deal. One of the transcontinental lines planned a huge terminal and I knew the location—I thought. I used two thousand of Chesland's money and bought options. The values were sure to skyrocket once the shops were announced.'

I believed that Chesland would have lent it to me if I could have reached him — but he was in Europe. So I used two thousand to buy options.' He was smiling ironically again. 'I told you the story wasn't unusual. The terminal was built elsewhere. My options were worthless. I didn't have two thousand dollars and I didn't know but one way to get it back. I tried the cotton market. I suppose I was panic-stricken. Anyway, when I woke up I found that I had spent all his money.'

'And then this?' Her voice was quiet.

'Then this,' John agreed. 'When he came back I told him everything.' He laughed again. 'That's why I don't believe in friendship. I offered to sell myself to him. The amount wasn't much. Only about nine thousand dollars. I offered to turn over all my earnings to him, but — well, he was not the friend I had thought him. He went from my office to the courthouse and in an hour I was in jail. It wasn't long until I was on my way to Madison. They gave me seven years.' He looked up at her. 'Simple, isn't it?'

Instead Evelyn's reply was irrelevant. 'So you're not really guilty?'

'Oh, so you believe me. Why, yes, I guess I am. I took the nine thousand all right. But that's done. I told you only because you asked. It's why I am bitter.'

'Do you think it worth while?'

'Bitterness? I'm human. I can't help it.'

'But surely that bitterness does not extend to me?'

'No-o, of course not. But you're a part of the old life and when I went to prison I determined to cut off every connection with the past. I'd come out clean and start over. It wasn't easy, but I did it. I never answered a letter while I was at Madison. There weren't many, but I ignored them. I wouldn't see any one who came there to talk to me. I simply have been swallowed up.'

'Your viewpoint is hardly sane, though I can understand it. Perhaps this will make the waiting easier. That's what I intended to do, anyway.'

Abruptly he harked back to something she had said earlier. 'You want to be amused, eh?' He laughed harshly. 'You won't find me very amusing.'

'I don't know.' Her lids were lowered and he could not see her eyes. 'Perhaps not, but it is impossible to retrace my steps now. You are here.'

She looked about her, suddenly conscious of the darkness that was almost complete. Inside the house lights were burning and they could hear the song from the negro in the kitchen. She rose reluctantly.

'I, too, have put the past away from me,' she said unexpectedly. She closed the door of the car. 'Put the machine in the garage and come into the house. I'll give you supper before you go to the barracks. You are to get all your meals here.'

John's thoughts were not pleasant as he drove the car into the garage, switched off the ignition and closed the swinging doors behind him. He was still suspicious; still incredulous. He believed that Evelyn Mortimer had told him only half the truth. Her real reason for bringing him to Alamosa had not been revealed. His face settled into grimmer lines as he hesitated before going into the kitchen where he would eat.

In the kitchen Evelyn was waiting for him. At her order the negro cook — a convict — placed food before him and he ate mechanically. There was no talking. Evelyn went to the front of the house and presently he heard voices. She returned to the kitchen followed by Mortimer. John ceased eating and stood up at the sight of him.

'See how he looks,' Evelyn said to her husband. 'I don't want him dressed like that. It isn't necessary for him to wear the convict white, is it?'

'No. I've spoken to Keller. He'll be issued civilian clothes in the morning. Have you been a trusty before?'

'No, sir,' answered John.

'Well, you are getting a chance here. Don't think you can run away and don't take advantage of Mrs. Mortimer's kindness.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You may go back to the stockade when you have finished eating. I shall not need you again to-night. To-morrow come here immediately after the first bell and get your breakfast. You will take all your meals here. You had better wash the cars in the morning.'

'Very well, sir.'

Mortimer left the room. Evelyn remained but a moment and followed him. As she went out her eyes sought John's, but his answering stare was impassive.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Ogletree reached the barracks and reported to the stevedore on duty, he was checked in on the list that lay on the desk which stood in the opening where the four wings of the building came together. Each of the wings was barred by a steel-latticed door. The man opened one of them and motioned for John to precede him into the long room where the cots were arranged in pairs along each side of the narrow passage.

It was not so hot as it had been in the morning, for a feeble breeze drifted in through the bars across the open windows. The room was dimly lighted by electric globes that burned at twenty-foot intervals. John knew that these were never extinguished. It was a part of the prison, this life without the shroud of darkness.

'Mr. Keller told me you were to come in after reg'lar roll call,' the stevedore said, as he led the way down the aisle between the bunks. Men were sitting on these iron cots; some talked to the men next to them; others wrote laboriously in the poor light, hunched over cheap tablets and spelling out the words tediously. Still others lay at full length on their bunks and stared at the cobwebs that festooned the ceiling.

It was all new to John. At Madison the prison had been divided into cell blocks; one man to a cell with talking between the men prohibited save at certain hours on Sunday. Here, apparently, there was no restraint. The stevedore paused before a bunk.

'This is Section A and yore bunk's Number two hundred and eighteen,' he said. 'This is hit. You kin talk here from

seven 'til eight 'f you're a mind to. Then the first bell rings an' there ain't no more talkin'.'

He left and John sat down on his bunk. He wanted time to think. His mind was confused. Memories were busy with him. He glanced over his scanty effects and then settled down on the cot and stared up at the ceiling. There was a moment of movement from the lower end of the hall and looking that way John saw a ragged-toothed, brown-fanged man detach himself from the group and move down the aisle toward him. The man walked with a limp and John wondered listlessly. Instinctively he found the face, even in indistinct lines, distasteful. This aversion grew when the man stopped at the bunk next his own and addressed him truculently.

'Where you been, buddy?'

'I'm Mr. Mortimer's chauffeur.' John's tone was curt. 'I came to-day.'

'How much time'd you bring with you?'

John recognized the prison routine. 'Five years,' he said. 'I've done two already.'

The man grunted and looked at him with hostile eyes. 'One of these here warden's pets, I s'pose. Dang it all! Just my luck! I was lookin' for a diff'rent kind of bunkie.'

John looked him over and answered in kind. 'You haven't got anything on me.'

'O-oh! high and mighty be you! Well, young feller, you got Skip Collier for a bunkie.'

'My name's Ogletree,' volunteered John. As well have the necessary formalities over and then he might be left to his own thoughts.

Collier pondered morosely, his evil little eyes roving over John. 'Yessir, one of these here pets! Christ! They sends men here to dig coal. I'm a coal digger, I be, an' I don't cotton to no other kind.' He spat scornfully into the cuspidor that stood between the bunks. 'Guess you'll be comin'

in here at all times of night an' gittin' us up. Hell! why do they allus have to stick me with warden's pets?'

'Keep your shirt on,' advised John crisply. 'Wait until I do before you yell.'

He kept his face impassive, suppressing the instinctive anger that stirred within him. His thoughts were sullen. He had had a faint sort of hope that Ames might be his bunkie; there could be nothing in common between himself and the man who still cupped his chin in his hands and looked at him as his jaws moved rhythmically. John recognized the type and anger flared up to meet the hostility in Collier's manner. Then he remembered Ames's words; no luck in prison. His hands under his head, he stared at the ceiling above him with lowering eyes. His whole body was tingling with rebellion, stirred by the sight of Evelyn Mortimer.

Then he was off on a new line of thought. He had long since ceased to care anything for her. He had not even heard of her marriage. She had not cared for him then and she did not care for him now. But something was missing. She had not brought him here without a motive. Could he bend this to his own benefit?

He was callous. If he could save himself at the expense of another, he would not hesitate; that was another lesson prison had taught him. If Evelyn Mortimer wished to be amused — well, the amusement might not be unprofitable to him. But there were dangers to be reckoned. Collier's voice at his elbow roused him.

'Where you been?'

John took his hands from under his head and turned until he could see Collier. An ungracious answer was on his lips, but he forced it back and answered civilly. No need to arouse the man's active enmity. Enemies were bad things to have; he had seen that at Madison. There was the case of Bud Arnold, now . . . Hence his tone.

'I was at Madison before I was sent here,' he said civilly.

Collier grunted again and wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. 'U-h-h. What for?'

'Embezzlement.'

'One of them genteel affairs,' commented Collier and grinned so that his yellow fangs showed. 'Guess you'd have a rough time in the mine.'

'Guess I would.'

'You fellers from Madison is allus soft. Takes 'bout two year to git you real limb'r'd up. Me, I'm right to home here. Been here eight year an' I guess I'll be here the rest of the time.' He was silent for a moment, brooding. "'Tain't right!' he burst out at last. "'Tain't right to bring you soft-ies in here from Madison an' give you the outside jobs when us fellers has earnt 'em. 'Tain't right, dammit!'

'Tell it to the Cap'n,' advised John. 'I'm doing what I'm told.'

'A-w-r, I know all 'bout that.' Collier was snarling. 'I've seen 'em afore now. But you wanta watch yore step, buddy, or you'll be right down with the rest of us.'

'That'll be all right.' John's tone was studiously restrained. 'I've heard something about Alamosa. How about wising me up a little?'

Collier's piglike eyes were uncompromising in their hostility. 'I ain't no wet nurse for warden's pets,' he said viciously. 'You git somebody else to do yore yarnin' for you. Me, I learnt quite a spell ago to 'tend to my own bisness an' not monkey with no others. You ain't in the mine, no-way. You're on top an' I'm tellin' you, you better hope to God you stay there. I been diggin' coal here eight year an' it takes a good man to last that long at Alamosa.'

John still controlled himself, but he lowered his tone as was his habit when angered. 'Listen, are you trying to start something?' he demanded, rolling over so that he faced

Collier. 'I don't like being your bunkie any better than you like it. Now drop it. Your line of talk doesn't make a hit with me at all.'

Collier was unabashed. 'Crowin' mighty loud for a spring rooster, ain't you? Your comb's shore gonna be cropped.'

'You won't do it, though.' John's contempt showed in the curtness of his words and he would have spoken further when a voice called him by name and he turned to see Ames's grizzled, quizzical face grinning at him across the aisle.

'Howdy, son. How'd you make out?'

John turned his back on Collier. He was unaccountably glad to see Ames's friendly face. In spite of his brave words to Evelyn Mortimer and to himself, he was lonely. There had been those first few weeks at Madison when he had . . . His smile at Ames was without the irony that usually flavored it.

'Pretty good,' he admitted. 'Better than I expected. I'm going to be Mr. Mortimer's chauffeur.'

Ames's eyes widened. 'Thought you said you didn't have nobody outside what was in-ter-est-ed in you.'

'Seems like I was wrong,' John admitted and shook his head slightly. Such things were not to be talked openly in the barracks with yard pigeons doubtless listening. 'How about you?'

'Me? Oh, I git along.' Ames stretched his arms and yawned, grinning again at John. 'They know Gideon Ames in this place. I ain't no baby. I'm goin' down to-morrow. I'm in yore friend's entry.' He pointed toward Collier, who was frankly listening. Ames yawned again. 'I'm shore glad to hear 'bout you. I kind of figgered you wasn't fitten to go in no mine.'

'Maybe I can help you a little,' John proffered. He warmed to Ames and the man's whimsical face with its slow, quizzical smile. How could he help it, he asked him-

self defensively, when he contrasted it with Collier's malevolent visage?

'Sho' now, I take that real kind of you, son.' Ames's drawl was pleased. 'I take it real kind that you kin say that knowin' how you feel. I'm shore gittin' up the mountain a little, ain't I? Don't look near so steep as she did.'

John understood his allegory and nodded. 'Guess you are at that,' he said.

'That's shore fine. But, son, don't you fergit that this here's Alamosa. Might be you'd need help 'fore I do. 'F you run into a gas pocket, I'll lend you my light if I kin. Ain't much nobody kin do in a place like this. Hit's ev'ry man for hisself. Guess you found that out at Madison.'

Ames continued his slow drawl.

'Doctor David's still here. I found that out this mawnin'. Hit was him all right.' He mused for a moment. 'An' that ain't the best part of it nuther. Mis' Selma she's here, too.'

John looked up quickly at the name. Selma Richie! He remembered her cool eyes and the — the —— He groped for the thought; it was the way she had looked at him. He wanted to ask Ames about her. He looked about him uncertainly. Apparently no one was listening, but then . . . stool pigeons . . . Bitter experience made him cautious.

'Can I come over to your bunk?' he asked Ames.

'Guess you kin. The bell ain't due to ring for most a quarter of a hour yet. Come on.'

John seated himself beside Ames, who moved over hospitably. 'Miss Selma is Dr. Richie's daughter, isn't she?'

'Yeah. An' a dang fine gal. Finest I ever knowed.'

John grunted noncommittally. 'I met her this afternoon,' he volunteered and gave a hard little laugh. 'She didn't care for me at all.'

'Aw, son, don't you go gittin' notions in yore head. Mis' Selma's the salt of the earth. You must of mistook her.'

'Not likely.' John's face was puzzled. 'She made herself perfectly plain.'

Ames's voice manifested concern. 'What did you do, son?'

'Not a thing. Seemed to blame me for being Mortimer's chauffeur.'

'Couldn't of been that. Mis' Selma knows this here prison an' she knows we don't pick out our jobs. You must of rubbed her the wrong way somehow.'

'That was obvious. Why should she treat me like that when she had never seen me before. Does she feel like that toward all of us here?'

'No! 'Course not! Ain't that what I just been tellin' you?'

'I gathered as much from what you said. Then it is something about me. I could not understand it when I had done absolutely nothing.'

'Can't have that.' Ames patted his knees with gnarled hands. 'Can't have that. I'm goin' to speak to her 'bout you.' The quizzical lines in his face deepened and he spoke with quiet feeling. 'You ain't understood. Why, son, she's the most compassionate creetur I ever knowed. Guess I owe that there leg to her.' He stretched out the member in question and looked at it thankfully.

'Tell me about it,' urged John. Again his inner sense warned him and he wanted to know more of this woman who was cool and scornful without reason.

'We-ell, there ain't a awful lot to tell. I got smashed up in the mine when I was here afore. That's why they sent me back to Madison when I come out of the horsepital. That's where I fust met Mis' Selma. Where I met Doctor David, too. That is to say really met him. 'Course I knowed who he was afore that, all right. Mis' Selma's his gal an' she helped him in the horsepital. Still does, too.'

'But about the leg,' prompted John.

'Well, they had a nigger flunky in that horsepital 'fore she come. He wa'n't halfway tendin' to nobody. 'Twa'n't Doctor David's fault,' he said in quick defense at John's look. 'They was shootin' the roof in the west headin' then an' there was a lot of 'em caught. Yeah, that's where I got mine. Well, this nigger, as I says, wa'n't payin' no 'tention to us a-tall. Doctor David he'd look in ev'ry day, but he had more'n he could do what with a lot of flu cases on the outside. Then Mis' Selma come. You oughter of seen things change. She run that shif'less nigger outa there an' got her another one. Wa'n't no trouble in gittin' things then. She seen I wa'n't gittin' 'long like I ought to of been an' she told Doctor David. He thought he was gonna have to take off that there leg, but she argyed with 'im like she was a reg'lar doctor herself. He 'greed to wait an' I come through. I allus figgered 'f it hadn't of been for her that there leg 'ud been burried long time 'fore I was.'

'And she was kind?' John's question was incredulous. He had seen no softness in the blue eyes that were so oddly out of place in Selma Richie's olive face.

Ames snorted. 'Kind! 'Course she was kind. She's just about the most considerate woman I ever knowed, I tell you. Lissen, son, you shorely must of been mistook.'

John shrugged indifferently. 'I don't think so, but what difference does it make? She didn't care for me. Why, I don't know; but she didn't. It isn't likely that I will get in her way.'

'That ain't no way to feel 'bout Mis' Selma. It ain't only that leg I got her to thank for. There's another thing.' His face grew solemn and his voice took on a reverent tone. 'Back on Dogwood Mountain where I come from I got a old woman an' a whole passel of kids. They been havin' a right hard time of it since I been down here. I guess I must of tole

Mis' Selma somethin' unbeknownst, 'cause fust thing I knowed she had me tellin' her all about 'em. She wrote 'em 'bout my bein' hurt. Lord, I couldn't no more of wrote n' a jaybird kin sing. I ain't never had time to learn how. But she wrote f'r me an' when she thought I was bad off she sent the Old Woman 'nough money to come all the way down here to see me. Son, 'twas just plumb heav'n to have the Old Woman down here with me then. I ain't seed her but oncet sence.' He sighed.

'I'm gonna git her to write me another letter to the Old Woman fust time come a visitin' Sunday.' His voice grew wistful and he shook his head. 'M-m-m, son, you wa'n't borned in the mountains an' you don't know nothin' 'bout the hankerin' for 'em. I been without 'em now for goin' on 'leven years. Why, my oldes' boy must be big as his pappy by now, but the Old Woman said he wa'n't a bit 'shamed of his daddy.'

John shivered. Ames's unconsciousness of what he told merely heightened the detail of the picture. John laid a hand on his knee. 'I'll write a letter for you any time you wish,' he offered.

'Will you now!' Ames's face brightened. 'That'll shore help.'

'You can have my tobacco money for stamps, too. I haven't any need of fifteen cents a week here. I don't write letters and I don't smoke. You spend yours for tobacco and I'll buy the stamps.'

Ames turned toward him, his face shining. He seemed almost childlike in his eagerness. 'Son, the Old Woman will shore call yore name blessed. I does git a awful lot of comfort out of my chawin'. Seems like that's all'll ease me when I gits restless.' He leaned back and clasped his hands about his knee. He rocked back and forth, his eyes tight closed as if to summon a picture. 'M-m-m, son, I kin just see the Old

Woman gittin' them letters an' waitin' for Brother Shoemaker to come 'long so he kin read 'em to her. Y'see, she can't read nuther; never even learnt to cipher an' any fool knows that's easier'n readin'. She'll have to come way down off Dogwood Mountain to the Cross Roads an' she'll take 'em back with her. An' all the kids'll set 'round the fire at night an' just look at that there letter from their pappy. M-m-m. An' then she'll git word to Brother Shoemaker an' he'll come over. Maybe for supper. An' Bub, he'll take my ole rifle an' go git 'em a squirrel 'r maybe a rabbit, an' if he's lucky an' they have notice 'nough, he mout git a wild turkey. An' Brother Shoemaker'll come ridin' up from the Cross Roads an' Ben — that's the next youngest un — 'll take his ole mare an' give her a good bait of corn an' rub her down cool. Brother Shoemaker he'll set out on the front ver-ander 'cause hit'll be hot. The Old Woman'll make him take off his shoes an' he'll set there an' drink spring water out of a gourd, kind of thumbin' through his ole Bible for somethin' 'bout God takin' care of the widowed an' the orphint. The Old Woman won't let him move 'til she gits that there squirrel or maybe rabbit or a turkey if Bud's lucky all on the table. She'll roll it 'round in corn meal an' fry it in its own grease an' Brother Shoemaker'll come in an' set an' bow his head an' talk that there piece 'bout the widowed an' the orphint right out of his head an' then they'll eat. There'll be corn pones an' maybe a Johnny-cake an' maybe some dandelion greens. M-m-m. An' then, when the Old Woman is shore Brother Shoemaker can't git a-nother bite down his craw, she'll take him back out on the verander an' he'll take his shoes off ag'in, 'cause Brother Shoemaker allus eats with his shoes on, an' then she'll give him that there letter you're gonna write for me an' he'll git out his ole steel-rimmed specs an' put 'em on the end of his nose an' then he'll read that there letter you're gonna write for me. M-m-m.'

Abruptly Ames ceased his gentle rocking; his eyes opened and he looked at John blankly for a moment. Then he stared about him as if dazed, his gaze uncomprehending. He laid a hand on John's.

'Son, I was a-settin' on that there porch on Dogwood Mountain then an' I was a-lookin' crost the Warrior to where the Painted Bluffs shows up on Mulberry Fork.' He dragged a sleeve across his face and once again he was the Ames John knew. Impulsively John asked a question.

'How long do you have to stay — like this?' He gestured about at the convicts.

'I got thirty year, son. That was ten year ago.'

'What did you do?'

'I killed a man, son. An' that's what I been fightin' all these years I been like this.'

'What?'

Ames's voice grew soft; his drawl was more pronounced. 'I been fightin' to keep myself from killin' another. I ain't noways certain how long I'm gonna last. Now 'bout this other ——'

The bell clanged stridently, and John, at a warning nudge from Ames, hurried to his own cot. But long after the men about him were snoring raucously, he lay wide-eyed, thinking . . . of Ames . . . of Dogwood Mountain . . . of Evelyn Mortimer . . . and finally of Selma Richie and her blue eyes and level brows. How had Ames softened her? He wished he knew, for her thinly veiled contempt had stung him unaccountably.

His last waking thought was of that peculiar note in Ames's voice. Ames had killed a man. What was it he had said? That he was fighting to keep from killing another. Who . . .

CHAPTER VII

As the Mortimer chauffeur, John was exempt from prison regulations; to all outward seeming he ceased to be a convict and one day discovered, to his mild surprise, that he was even somewhat of a personage in the prison.

He had been chosen for the softest of the soft jobs at Alamosa; therefore it followed that he had the ear of the powers that were. Perhaps Blood Keller had been told to lay off . . . Mortimer had known him when . . . The rumors traveled about the prison; whispered discreetly among the check-runners underground; mouthed in the dark galleries of the manway where the convicts trudged down to the working face. They even reached the guards, who eyed John in speculative interest and refrained from interference.

Like Skip Collier, some of the men resented the favor shown him. Most of them, however, were frankly envious and pathetically eager to whisper to him a plea for a word to Mortimer or Keller. They came to him at night, when the day's work was over, and while they sat on their bunks in the cell block and gossiped as men will who have only their tongues for diversion.

Lying on his cot and taking infrequent part in the talk about him, John heard tales of unbelievable brutality told with matter-of-fact acceptance of its inevitability and a certain terrible humor. There was no self-pity in them. They laughed at themselves, at their own misfortunes, and saved their melancholy against the time when they stretched themselves on their bunks and covered their faces against the light that was never extinguished.

The men came to John half-fearfully, cringing a little,

though that did not deceive him. He knew that they could on the instant turn ugly. There were stories of convict mutinies when —— He was not misled by their placative subservience.

‘Lissen, buddy, ain’t you pretty close to the Cap’n? Lissen, he docked me for rock last week an’ now they’re holdin’ my mail. I ain’t had a word for two weeks. An’ next Sunday’s vistin’ Sunday, too. They ain’t gonna let me see nobody an’ my girl was comin’ from Birmingham. Ain’t no way I kin tell her not to come. Lissen, buddy, you tell the Cap’n . . .’

They did not believe John when he told them that he had been favored by chance; that he had never spoken to Keller; that he did not know Mortimer save by sight.

‘Aw, hell, don’t try to stuff me! You ain’t no windy shot. How come you ——’

From pleading the men turned to abuse. John was denying the freemasonry of the convict. Gradually there grew about him a wall of tacit hostility. When the convicts saw that it was useless to appeal to him, they let him alone and John found himself isolated except for Gideon Ames. Not even to Ames did he tell the reason for his transfer to Alamosa nor of his meeting with Evelyn Mortimer.

At the Mortimer home his duties were simple enough: to keep the two cars spick and span; to drive Evelyn Mortimer where she wished; occasionally to drive Mortimer, himself, to the junction of the Tidewater Northern at Climax where Mortimer took the train on his frequent business trips to Birmingham or Montgomery. Beyond that there were no demands on his time.

There were humiliations, of course. John accepted them with outward indifference. There were the meals: these he ate in the kitchen of the Mortimer home, served by the white-clad convict cook. It was better than prison fare. In

his moments of rebellion, he whispered to himself that his present state was better than the mine and it eased him.

Gradually there grew up in him a sort of content. He was not dressed in prison garb; true to his promise, Mortimer had seen that a suit of neat khaki was provided for his chauffeur. John did not conform to prison hours; he was up early in the morning and frequently not back at his bunk until long after the eight o'clock bell. It all depended upon what hour the Mortimers finished with him. Sometimes he drove them together at night. These were the hardest hours he spent, but even so, after two years of rigid and unvarying prison routine, John found the virtual independence grateful.

John never forgot that he was a convict — dependent for his favor upon a woman. He was still attempting to discover the real explanation of why Evelyn Mortimer had brought him to Alamosa. Evelyn, herself, made no pretense, but he found it difficult to credit her words.

'I've been selfish for years,' she said. 'Now it pleases me to do something for some one else. It gives me an unusual feeling of virtue. I am acquiring merit if you like!'

They were sitting in the car on the far side of Silver Lake when she answered his question. They were much together. There were long drives on the country roads that surrounded Alamosa; frequent trips to meet the train at Climax where the spur that served Alamosa joined the main line. Evelyn seemed to find her house irksome and there was scarcely an afternoon when she did not order the car into the country.

'I want to forget the prison,' she explained to John. 'I want to get away from it completely.'

The problem of their relations John had settled in his direct way before he had been a week at the Mortimer home. It came one afternoon when they had driven around Silver Lake and along a road that led off the lake-shore into the

forest and around a huge rock. Evelyn had pointed out the rock.

'They call that the Rock House,' she said. 'Doesn't it look like a house? There's a cave behind it, they say. You get into it through a tunnel in the rock. Want to go and look?'

'I guess not,' John answered. 'I will wait for you.'

But Evelyn shook her head and fell to smoothing her hair. The afternoon was hot and she had taken off her hat to fan herself. She was in the front seat beside John. In Alamosa, though, she rode in the rear.

'It would look queer if I rode with you around the prison,' she said. 'But when we get out into the country I will come up in front so that we can talk.'

John spoke without equivocation. 'You are very kind. But before we go further we must understand each other. I do not wish to presume on your kindness, which, I think, is greater than has ever before been shown me. Apparently you have forgotten that I am a convict. But I do not forget and I cannot.'

'But I want you to!' Evelyn cried.

'You mean that you ignore everything that has passed? I am your servant — I almost said slave. The word is melodramatic, but it amounts to that. I've been sold by the State.'

'Don't be bitter,' she said, and laid one cool, slender hand on his. 'Of course you are to forget. I didn't want a servant, John. I wanted a friend.'

John laughed a little unpleasantly. 'Your need must have been rather desperate then.'

'It was,' she answered absently. 'But I would have chosen you if the choice had been a free one. I haven't forgotten those days in Birmingham, John.'

Ogletree moved restlessly. 'I cannot understand you,' he

said. 'At the time I didn't think they meant so terribly much to you. There was little evidence of it, anyway.'

'I know.' Her tone was musing. 'Sometimes we get the proper perspective only with time. Not every one has the chance to renew a friendship such as ours. Doesn't it mean anything to you, John?'

He shrugged. 'I've quit living in the past. I've discounted my losses and when I get out I know exactly what I shall do.'

'What?'

'Never mind. It could not interest you because it does not concern you.'

'You mean you're — you're going after — him?'

'Chesland? Lord, no. I've finished with him. I'm just going to start over. I'll be — wiser and more cautious, perhaps.'

That had been all for the time being. Evelyn was variable, but always kind. Sometimes she spoke freely of herself, telling John of the years that had intervened since he had seen her in Birmingham; of her marriage with Mortimer.

'He's a comer, John,' she said. 'I knew that when we were married. We'll be rich some day.'

He looked at her appraisingly. 'You've a reasonable amount of money now. You've what would be luxury to many people. And still you haven't the thing that you want.'

'What is that?'

'Happiness.'

'And I am discontented?'

'Of course. Haven't you told me so in a dozen different ways? Isn't the very fact that I am here an evidence of it?'

There was the glimmer of a smile in her eyes as she answered. Her lips curved in an enigmatical smile. 'I'm not nearly so discontented as I was, John.'

John answered directly. With her he never fenced with words. Sometimes she was rather abashed by the frankness of his speech. There was never any sentiment in their talk. John made it impossible with his downright words.

'You mean me, I suppose,' he said. 'As I understood it, you brought me here to amuse you. You've done me a very great service. You are making my prison term lighter than I would have believed possible. Well, I owe you something in return and if I can amuse you it pleases me. It's little enough, but it happens to be all I can do.'

She was silent a moment considering. He felt her violet eyes on him. 'I don't know that I particularly like that,' she said at last.

'My amusing you? Why not?'

'It — it rather discounts anything that you say or do or feel. It means that you do things because you think I will like them.'

'I am only trying to pay you in the coin of what you seem to desire.'

'I like attention, yes. I like deference, too. The idea of having you here has appealed to me. I've changed a good bit since you came. But this isn't a bargain and sale.'

'What is it then?' he asked bluntly. 'Your husband bought me and gave me to you for a plaything. That's the bald way of stating it. There's no use quibbling.'

'You prefer it to be on that basis?'

'What other basis could there be?'

She smiled enigmatically. 'None, of course. Suppose we start home.'

CHAPTER VIII

JOHN OGLETREE was working over the Mortimer sedan and whistling a bit at the task when he looked up to find Evelyn Mortimer standing in the door of the garage. He smiled at her and his greeting was without bitterness.

'I'll be ready in a minute,' he said. 'You're a little early, aren't you?'

'Perhaps,' said Evelyn, but she made no move to return to the house. Instead she stood and watched silently as John flicked the last trace of dust from the resplendent hood, tested the oil-gauge and glanced at the gas-indicator. He hurried a little and his lips were curved in a small smile. The shadows were gone from about his eyes and his step was quick and purposeful. He had lost the soddenness of the prison in the weeks since he had come to Alamosa.

'You have changed,' she said.

At her words John's face sobered and he straightened. 'Yes, I have,' he said quietly and came over to stand by the open window where his eyes were just level with Evelyn's. 'May I speak seriously for a moment?'

'Of course.'

'I have a confession to make and an apology to offer.'

She waited for him to continue, enigmatic violet eyes on his downbent head. His voice was muffled when he spoke at last. 'I've been here nearly five weeks now. I — I was wrong and I want you to know that I realize it and that I'm sorry. You don't live two years like I did without having your vision warped. I didn't believe you when you said that you wanted to help me. I was suspicious. I thought that there was something behind that you hadn't told me.'

'And you don't feel that any more?'

He threw his hands apart with an eloquent little gesture. 'How could I? Your kindness has been unending; if I have said nothing it was not because I was not grateful. It wasn't so much the material things, but you've been considerate of humiliations that would have escaped the ordinary person.'

'I haven't been able to save you all of them.'

'Of course not. But when it was possible you have, and I've seen and appreciated. Sometimes I've been difficult, I know, for you don't shake off the mental condition in which I lived in a day or two. But your patience has been endless. I've wanted to acknowledge your kindness but this was the first time I felt I could speak.'

'I'm glad you told me now,' Evelyn said, 'or it would have been necessary to postpone it.'

'Why?'

'Because we will have company on the ride this afternoon. That's why I came down early.'

'Company?'

'Yes. I've finally persuaded Selma Richie to go with me. It's the first time since you came that I've been able to find her when she had nothing to do.'

John stiffened inwardly at the name. He had almost forgotten her in the weeks since she had warned him of something he did not understand, but the recollection of her thinly veiled contempt came back instantly. All his effervescent spirits left him; he felt curiously depressed.

'Shall we go then?' he asked, his voice flat.

'Yes. Drive by the Richie cottage. You remember where we stopped the first day you came. You'll find Selma interesting.' She laughed quietly. 'She thoroughly disapproves of your presence here.'

'Oh!' John's exclamation was eloquent. Then that must have been what she meant and that was why she had looked at him . . . 'You told her?' he asked.

‘Yes. The whole story.’

John slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine. ‘Was that necessary?’ he asked.

‘I felt that it was.’ Evelyn spoke defensively in answer to his disapproving tone. ‘I thought I might need help and she could have helped. When I found that I would not need her it was too late to recall the confidence. You need not worry. Selma’s true blue and she is my friend.’

John strove in vain to bring back his mood of lightness and to capture again the feeling with which he had spoken to Evelyn Mortimer of his gratitude.

Before the small white house, half-hidden in the flowering jasmine vines, he stopped. When Selma Richie came out the brick walk he was standing deferentially beside the open door of the car. She stepped into the machine and seated herself beside Evelyn without a glance in his direction. He closed the door and waited for orders.

‘Shall we go up the mountain or around the lake?’ asked Evelyn. ‘Let’s go out to the Rock House. I’ve always wanted to go there. You know where it is, John. Go around the lake and take the Branch road.’

Evelyn chattered gayly, ignoring the monosyllabic answers from Selma. She told of a shopping trip to Birmingham and of the feminine things she had bought there. ‘Though the Lord knows what I’m going to do with them,’ she said. ‘There’s no place here to wear them.’

‘Keep them; you’ll need them,’ advised Selma.

Evelyn looked at her closely. ‘You are tired,’ she said.

Selma shook her head. ‘Not physically. I was in the operating room all the morning. It grows trying sometimes. I’m sorry for them and I can’t do anything about it. Sometimes I — oh! well, you’ve heard my views on that before.’

Evelyn shrugged indifferently. There was a strange lack of feeling in her about some things. She never allowed her

thoughts to dwell on what went on behind the stockade walls. It was none of her affair and she did not care to be troubled. 'I don't see what difference they can make to you,' she said. 'You do all that you can for them.'

'It does though.'

They left the lake and turned down a road that followed the convolutions of a small creek. Presently John drew aside into a small clearing and pointed ahead to where a giant boulder loomed above the trees.

'The Rock House,' he said and switched off the engine and waited.

Selma would have opened the door and gotten out, but Evelyn stopped her. 'Wait a moment I have something to say. Turn around, John.'

Obediently Ogletree faced about in his seat. Both women were gazing at him and he shifted uncomfortably. 'There he is,' said Evelyn directly. 'Now are you convinced that what I did was worth while?'

'No,' answered Selma.

'Your ideas have not changed?'

'They have not.'

'The end does not justify the means?'

'To me it would not.'

'I see.' Evelyn's tone was dry, but Selma met her look squarely. John flushed and kept silent, guessing at what the two women meant.

'Have you been avoiding me?' Evelyn demanded at last.

'No,' answered Selma coolly. 'I wouldn't put it that way. I wanted to make it plain to you that I would have no part in what you are doing. I do not sympathize with it. I think you are deceiving yourself and you are certainly deceiving your husband. Why?'

Evelyn's violet eyes began to glow. 'You speak very plainly,' she said.

'This is a time for plain speaking. I do it for your sake. You need to be awakened. You are soothing yourself with altruistic thoughts that you are doing this from some lofty motive of helping him on his feet again. You're not. You're doing it for a very selfish reason — you want to be amused. You are playing with fire and I will neither encourage it nor approve of it by my silence. It is wrong in principle and you know what the consequences may be.'

'I shall be able to care for whatever consequences there are,' said Evelyn, a touch of hauteur in her voice. 'You mean Paul?'

'Yes.'

'Is that why you have been too busy to go with me? Why you have been so incessantly occupied? Why you have not been to my house?'

'I made myself plain, I believe.'

'I find it hard not to grow angry.' Evelyn's tone was cool. 'Is this your idea of friendship? Your assumptions are rather broad.'

'I judge entirely from what you yourself told me. And remember, please, that this was told me without solicitation.'

John looked on, his face crimson in an agony of humiliation. Once Selma Richie's blue eyes flicked him and the contempt in them burned him. He dared not speak. He bit his tongue to keep back the words, for he knew that he was gagged. Evelyn Mortimer might forget that he was a convict, but here was a woman who did not. He had no desire to court a caustic rebuke.

Evelyn was silent, looking down at her hands folded in her lap. Gradually the flush died out of her face as she mastered herself. Selma Richie gazed into the woods. To John there was something unyielding in her attitude. The woman was hard. Her face gave the key to her nature.

'You told me at the time that you disapproved,' Evelyn said finally. 'But I did not realize that you felt so strongly.'

'If I did not care for you as I do, it would be a matter of no concern to me,' answered Selma promptly. 'I happen to care, that's all, and if I stop you ——'

'Can't we discuss it on that basis, then?' asked Evelyn Mortimer gently. 'Your tone and words would scarcely lead me to think your feelings what you say.'

Still there was no yielding in Selma Richie's uncompromising attitude. 'I didn't look forward to this with any pleasure. I postponed it as long as I could. But it was inevitable and there isn't any use in my pretending that I feel as I do not.'

'I find it hard to reconcile your present attitude with what I know of you,' Evelyn Mortimer said half-musingly. 'You have always been compassionate. Your very presence in Alamosa is proof of that. I've seen you sorrow over convicts not half so deserving of help as John. And yet you would have me let a man like this go to the mines because I was afraid to risk something to help him.'

Selma laughed with quiet scorn. 'What kind of man is he? He is perfectly willing to trade on a woman's sentimental compassion, to allow her to jeopardize herself for him. I don't think that speaks so very highly for him.'

For the first time John spoke voluntarily. 'You are quite right,' he said, his voice trembling. 'Although I never thought about it in quite that light I can see how it might appear to you. I was willing to accept Mrs. Mortimer's help and I was grateful for it. What would you have me do?'

'I'll not argue with you.'

He flushed again at the contempt in her tone.

'You put me in an impossible position,' John persisted. 'You force me to defend myself seemingly at the expense of

Mrs. Mortimer. I'll ask you one question. Are convicts free agents?'

'Have you made any effort to escape from a situation which is perilous for Mrs. Mortimer?'

John gestured helplessly. 'What can I do?'

'We will return now,' Evelyn interrupted quietly, though pain was evident in her voice. 'I see that I have made a mistake.'

Selma acquiesced with a nod, closed her lips firmly and then thought better of it.

'I'll try to make you see my point of view. You won't because you aren't thinking logically. This man here committed a crime. He deserved punishment and he is not receiving it. He is taking advantage of you because of some sentimental passage in the past. Can't you see how contemptible it is? And you yourself are in danger. Every day you are putting yourself in this man's power. Suppose Paul learned the truth! What would he think? What would he do? Can't you see that? Yes, I'm sympathetic with people who are really in trouble. But I have no patience with a man who hides behind a woman's skirts to save himself. I haven't any respect for that sort of man and if you will think a moment, you won't have either.'

The drive back to Alamosa was made in absolute silence. John stared straight ahead. He halted before the Richie home and Selma got out. At the step she turned for a look at Evelyn, who smiled at her quietly.

'Good-night, Selma,' she said.

John thought he saw disquiet in Selma's eyes. 'Good-night, Evelyn. Shall I call at your home to ——'

Evelyn did not wait for her to complete the sentence. 'I am afraid not, Selma. Your time must be fully occupied with the hospital. Good-night. Go on, John.'

Evelyn did not get out immediately when they halted be-

fore the Mortimer garage. John turned in his seat and met her eyes. They were very dark. She spoke with almost a gasp.

'That hurt,' she admitted. 'I didn't expect it.'

'I am sorry,' he said awkwardly.

'You needn't be. It wasn't your fault and you couldn't help it.'

'It isn't necessary for you to run any risks in my behalf.'

'Don't speak of that!' Her tone was fierce. 'I know that what I am doing is justified.' She threw back her head with a reckless fling. 'I'm going to do it anyway. This shan't make any difference.'

'It heightens my gratitude,' he said humbly.

Again there was a reckless note in her voice. 'I shall want you to be very grateful,' she said.

Inwardly John Ogletree chilled a little, but his answer was quietly deferential. 'Could I be anything else?' he asked.

CHAPTER IX

CONSTRAINT between John Ogletree and Evelyn Mortimer dated from the afternoon of their ride with Selma Richie. John never again attained the entire freedom from self-consciousness that had previously been his. The feeling was intangible, yet it grew and grew until it possessed him, and instead of the placid life to which he had looked forward he became acutely uncomfortable.

John was afraid. He admitted that fact to himself even if he did not dare to put a name to his fear. He was warned by some inner instinct, but his feet were set on a path where he must go forward or turn for refuge to the mine. He was not yet ready for that — nor would he ever be, for John Ogletree told himself that he was not of the stuff of which martyrs and heroes are made. Any alternative was preferable to the mine, but still his uneasiness mounted.

Evelyn herself did not change save in a subtle and indefinite way which disquieted John. There was never a reference to Selma Richie between them, nor were there any further invitations to her for auto rides into the country. Evelyn Mortimer and John rode alone, but the words that Selma had spoken were ever present in the minds of both.

John groped for a definition of her attitude and at last the word came to him. She appeared to be waiting, secretly amused at the delay, but waiting. He put the thought away from him hurriedly.

Yet he did not find talk with her difficult. She was always ready to speak of casual things; to talk of her life after John had unobtrusively withdrawn to nurse his hurt. She chatted of mutual acquaintances; she was ready to talk of books, of

music, of which she was inordinately fond, or of the mine itself.

John followed her lead eagerly, but underneath he felt that attitude of tension, of waiting. Evelyn Mortimer's real self, tireless, aloof, was waiting for something. John closed his eyes deliberately and took refuge in literal simplicity that baffled sentences of double meaning.

His task was not easy. He found himself perpetually guarding his tongue lest some unthoughted utterance should call forth he knew not what. Instead of bidding the prison farewell for another day with a light heart, it now appeared to him almost a refuge. At least it was real and the men on the bunks about him did not say one thing with their tongues and another with their eyes.

Gideon Ames was a great comfort to him and he to the grizzled convict. Their friendship ripened rapidly under John's loneliness and his growing fears of what the future held. He attempted to draw from Ames details of what went on underground, but found him uncommunicative.

John did not press the question. He knew that his lot was immeasurably superior to that of the men who toiled underground. At night he looked about him and saw in their exhaustion visual evidence of what he escaped. Sometimes a cot was empty, but no questions were ever asked. The convicts looked at each other sideways and hunched an eloquent shoulder. Doghouse, maybe. Solitary. Hospital after a little trip out to the yard sergeant's hut in one corner of the stockade.

John studied the men about him. They were a different type from those he had seen at Madison. These men were rougher, bitterer, more reckless, enduring an iron discipline because they must. He saw there was little talk except between buddies. Ames explained about that.

'They got so many snitches scattered 'mongst us 'tain't

safe to talk less'n you know who you talkin' to. That's why ev'ry feller needs a buddy. 'F 'twasn't for you I'd of busted long time ago.'

Ames frankly worshiped John. The letters had done that, for John had not forgotten his promise. Once each month he wrote the one letter allowed Ames by prison regulations. Ames was a killer; he was doing time for murder. He was allowed to write one letter and to receive one each month. John, now, was permitted four, one each week — but he was only an embezzler.

John told Ames one Sunday afternoon when the mountain man had expressed a wistful desire for more letters that he had found a way to get them for him. John had hesitated long over the plan, but when he saw Ames's face brighten and felt the mountaineer's hand on his shoulder he knew that it was worth while. Ames did not say much. He was not demonstrative, but John's heart warmed at the grip of his fingers.

Every Sunday afternoon when the prison routine was done John and Ames sat themselves in a corner of the long cell tier and John wrote a letter to the Old Woman on Dogwood Mountain.

These letters John gave to Evelyn Mortimer and she posted them for him. To Evelyn Mortimer Brother Shoemaker addressed the labored epistles he wrote at the dictation of the Old Woman and these John carried back to Ames. The man's gratitude was worshipful.

John had been diffident about asking a favor of Evelyn Mortimer, but when he went to her with his story of Ames and the Old Woman and Brother Shoemaker she assented indifferently.

'They've only seen each other once in ten years,' John explained. 'Just think of that! And neither can read.'

'Very well,' Evelyn Mortimer agreed languidly. 'I don't

care anything about them, but if you wish it they may write to me. I don't suppose Paul would object and it makes no difference if he does.'

'Ames will be very grateful,' John said.

Evelyn looked at him sideways. He saw the lines about her mouth deepen and her lids veiled her eyes for a moment. She sat silent, gazing at him speculatively, a question hidden deep in her eyes. There was a moment of constraint and then she spoke easily.

'I am not doing this for Ames. I am doing it for you. He means nothing to me. I don't even know him.'

'But he's human!' John could not suppress the cry.

'Your views evidently have changed since you came here,' Evelyn observed and there was a trace of malice in her smile.

John's face darkened and he closed his lips firmly. 'I am sorry I troubled you, but if you will do this it will mean more happiness than you realize to a number of people.'

'I will do it,' she promised.

So Ames had his letters and learned of the little farm on Dogwood Mountain and Brother Shoemaker had many trips to make up the twisting trail from the Cross Roads where he held services in the bleak meeting-house every fourth Sunday.

Of Mortimer John saw little. Occasionally the master of Alamosa appeared and gave him brusque orders. Sometimes he was roused early and bidden to drive Mortimer to Climax where he took the early train for Birmingham and thence to Montgomery. And at night John occasionally waited for the midnight accommodation and Mortimer's return.

On their rides there was little talk between them. Mortimer was wrapped in his thoughts, unconscious of the figure at his side.

John studied him covertly and shivered at what he saw. A hard man, he thought. Merciless when roused; ruthless,

implacable. All this John saw in the heavy blue-jowled jaws and grim lips.

John was content to live in obscurity. Mortimer, once he had given his wife a chauffeur, seemed to have forgotten his existence completely. Ogletree did not court his attention.

Once only was there human contact between them and that was at Climax where they waited for the Birmingham local. Mortimer had gotten out of the car and gone into the single general store with a curt word to Ogletree to follow him.

Inside Mortimer looked about and frowned at not finding what he wanted.

'Mrs. Mortimer wished some candles for the living-room,' he said. 'She needed them for to-night and I do not want to bother with getting them in Birmingham.'

There were no candles and Mortimer bit off an impatient oath and turned to give John a message. But Ogletree had fallen behind and was staring down through the showcase to where an array of cheap jewelry was piled helter-skelter. Mortimer, struck by something in his face, followed his eyes and saw that he looked at a small packet of needles and pins and thread and buttons such as womenless men sometimes find handy to have about.

Mortimer's eyes, keen, observing, looked at Ogletree again; noted the safety pins at the cuffs, the buttons missing, the carefully concealed rent in his shirt.

John had a lone five-cent piece in his pocket but he was absorbed in an orgy of spending. If he had a couple of dollars now, he would buy . . . He was startled at Mortimer's voice at his elbow.

'Let him have that.' Mortimer pointed to the case that had aroused John's envy. The master of Alamosa threw down a five-dollar bill. 'Take it out of this.'

John pocketed the housewife. Surprise made his words

come with difficulty. 'Thank you, sir,' he said. 'I — I really do need one of those.'

'Keep yourself neat,' ordered Mortimer brusquely. 'Here!' With the word he tossed John a dollar bill.

John flushed and picked up the currency with fingers that trembled. Again he stammered his thanks, knowing that he could not refuse the money, no matter the injury to his pride. But John was frank with himself. He would have kept the money in any event; its potential value was too great at the canteen in the prison where on Sunday mornings prisoners were permitted to do such shopping as its facilities and their pocketbooks allowed.

John was ashamed but his heart leaped at the sight of the dollar, crumpled and twisted on the fly-specked showcase. He was ashamed of his eagerness as he thrust it into his pocket. . . . Prison had done that to him.

Sometimes after that Mortimer spoke to John. More often he was unconscious of his presence.

Occasionally John thought about Selma Richie. Her name had not been mentioned by Evelyn Mortimer since her cool good-bye at the Richie home. What went on in the evenings John did not know.

John put Selma Richie aside. She had not been just, but after all, what did it matter? She was not touching his life. But he would have liked to explain to her.

CHAPTER X

PAUL MORTIMER'S face gave no key to his thoughts. He sat in an easy-chair and watched his wife at the grand piano in an alcove of the low-ceilinged living-room. He smoked quietly and from time to time dropped the ash from his cigar into the stand at his elbow. It was his only movement. About his head the smoke curled lazily, drifting up through the amber shade of the light above in slow convolutions.

His head thrown back against one wing of the chair, Mortimer watched his wife. She appeared unconscious of his scrutiny, her head bent down and her fingers straying idly among the black keys of the magnificent instrument. Gradually they crept into a melody, a haunting, minor cadence with an undertone of sadness, the same motif occurring in irregular measure.

Mortimer smoked and listened, his thoughts as busy as his body was idle. He was not a man of sensitive or acute perceptions; emotionally he was material, his nature none too finely attuned to the nuances of another's mood. But he was not stupid and his mind was mercilessly logical once it took hold of a course of reasoning.

Mortimer, himself, was cold, but that did not mean that he could not gauge emotion in others. Once awakened, his power of observation was acute and his mind fitted cause to effect with mathematical exactitude.

Just when it was that Mortimer first became conscious of a change in the atmosphere of his home he could not have told. But gradually the feeling came to him and his perceptions once roused seized on incidents that he would at one time have passed over as inconsequential.

Once, years before, in another mining camp where he had been an engineer, he had had the same feeling regarding a room.

Without logical reason he had ordered the men from the entry, ignoring the protests of the mine foreman and the questions of the superintendent. Two hours after there had been a crack in the roof and a ten-ton boulder crushed the ground on which the men must have stood to swing their picks at the working face.

He had the same feeling now as he sat and watched his wife, giving ear to the plaintive air that stole out from under her listless fingers. It was not like her to sit in semi-darkness; the melody she played was foreign to her; she craved light and laughter and brisk talk. Was she the source of his uneasiness? Was the subtle change that he sensed about him in her?

He considered the questions calmly, his thoughts functioning coolly. Himself he knew had not changed. But Evelyn . . . Of late she had been given to unaccountable silences. Sometimes he would look up to find her staring vacantly into space over the top of her book or with her embroidery lying in her lap and she looking down at the gay threads with unseeing eyes. He had been watching her since that first faint subconscious warning that all was not as it had been.

Evelyn no longer complained at her enforced stay in Alamosa. She did not question him regarding his business. She seemed aloof, wrapped in her own thoughts. She was distant, distraught, and Mortimer felt a tension in her manner that was unaccountable. Their manner of living had not changed; their prospects had not altered. Before them were still the years against which she had rebelled. But she rebelled no more. She seemed content, sufficient unto herself. There had never been any close communion of spirit between Mortimer and his wife, but still —— He felt that he

knew her much better than she knew him. Before he had been able to gauge her motives in every action. He had never been under any misapprehension about her regard for himself. He had known when he married her that she was not in love with him.

Mortimer had not greatly cared. He did not wish to be hampered by too much affection. Love was greedy. Often it demanded greater sacrifices than he was willing to give. He had not asked demonstrative regard. He had not expected to be the beginning and the end of her existence.

Until now he had always felt that he could read his wife without difficulty. Abruptly the book was closed to him. She became an utter stranger, sharing none of her thoughts and not even admitting him to the casual intimacy that is inevitable between two people who share the same house.

Mortimer thought it out very carefully while Evelyn sat and played. Presently she broke into a wordless croon in time to the melody that she drew from the keys. His wife had changed and it must have required some tremendous solvent to bring such a metamorphosis in one whom he had thought as stable as himself.

But there had been no such agency in their lives — or if there had, he had known nothing of it. It existed; of that there could be no question. Mortimer's eyes grew keen at the thought and one hand lifted to smooth the bristling black moustache that softened his hard mouth. His instinct had not been wrong; there was something unseen here. It must be discovered; there could be no dark corners in his life. Mortimer had not an inkling of what lay behind the change in his wife, but he determined to find out.

She still sat before the piano, shifting now into a statelier cadence but with the undertone of sadness still present. Mortimer felt that there was a wall between them that had not existed before. He did not like walls save of his own mak-

ing and this one he resolved to level — but all in good time. First he must know what confronted him. Then he could intelligently measure his course.

He rubbed out his cigar and spoke in good-humored protest. 'Evelyn, what sort of music is that?' She did not cease playing but continued to coax unexpected overtones from the piano, waking the keys gently octave after octave. Mortimer raised his voice and repeated his question.

Evelyn let her hands fall and half-turned. She seemed like one newly aroused from sleep. 'What did you say?' she asked.

'I wondered what sort of music that was?'

'That? Oh, just a simple little thing. They call it "The Shepherd Boy" I believe.'

Mortimer pretended to shiver. 'Play something else. That gives me the all-overs.'

Evelyn smiled faintly, but she did not turn again to the piano. 'I like it. I never heard anything so — so simple. The boy has been wandering all day after his sheep. Now it is evening and he is tired. You can see him lie down on the grass and the horns of elf-land soothe him and that is what they play.'

'Are you tired?' Mortimer asked briskly. 'You aren't getting ——'

'Oh, no. I'm perfectly all right.' Evelyn brightened instantly, but Mortimer felt that it was assumed and found her next words disquieting. 'I was just thinking,' she said.

'Of what?'

'Oh, nothing much. Rather foolish thoughts, I suppose.'

She left the piano and sat opposite him in another great chair that seemed to swallow her. Mortimer saw her head go back and her body fall into an attitude of listlessness. Her eyes closed. Of what was she thinking? . . . That was what he must discover.

Mortimer did not hurry. In the days that followed he merely grew more observant; more watchful of her moods; conscious now of shades of emotion that had escaped him before. He found more time to be at home, but he did not intrude on her. His entrance in the afternoon was inconspicuous, but he was vigilant. He had no confidants; there was no one in Alamosa of whom he could seek counsel. Not that he would have done so, for Mortimer had no intimates, nor would have so long as he lived. His was not a nature that gave confidence.

He cast back over the preceding months for some explanation of the change in Evelyn and could find none. Unnoticed he observed her at hours when she little suspected his presence or his watching eyes. That he might overlook no possibility he summoned Dr. Richie to his office one afternoon and there questioned him bluntly.

‘What’s wrong with my wife, Dr. Richie?’

Doctor David’s bushy eyebrows shot up and his answer was equally brusque. ‘She hasn’t enough to do. An idle mind, Mortimer, offers the devil as many possibilities as idle hands.’

‘Oh, that! Forget it. She has plenty to occupy her if she chooses. You all sing the same tune. There is something more than that, I think.’

‘Why do you think so?’

‘Because of the change in her manner, in her thoughts, in every action. She is introspective, moody, distraught, but she does not complain. I could understand if she showed more spirit. It is not her custom to acquiesce so readily in what she finds distasteful.’

‘Physically there is nothing wrong with Mrs. Mortimer that I can discover.’

‘Have you seen her lately?’

‘Yes. She calls on me on an average of once a week. It

isn't necessary. If there is any trouble it is not physical.'

'Suppose you come over to-night and see her in different surroundings. Let her believe that it is a social call. Bring Selma with you. Something is wrong.'

Dr. Richie assented, and that night, shortly after the moon had crept up in the east and the frogs were giving their nightly chorus from the reeds and lilies along the shores of Silver Lake, Dr. Richie and Selma were ushered into the living-room of the Mortimer home. Evelyn rose to greet them.

'Why, Dr. Richie! Come in! And Selma, too!'

She spoke to Selma as if they had parted but yesterday. In her poise there was no evidence of feeling; by no slightest coolness was it indicated that the friendship between them was ended. If she wondered at Selma's presence it did not reach the surface.

Selma, too, was quite easy. She had protested against accompanying her father but had yielded when she saw that he desired it particularly. She knew Evelyn Mortimer too well to expect a rebuff and then, too, she was lonely for her friend. It had not been her intention to create a breach between them, but Evelyn had taken fire so quickly . . . Selma had waited in vain for some sign of forgiveness and when none had come set herself to wait.

This request of her father was opportune. Perhaps it might give her an opportunity of reëstablishing the intimacy that she had missed. Her heart sank at the sight of Evelyn's face. There was no forgiveness there. So she forced herself to match Evelyn's quiet courtesy.

His eyes intent, Mortimer watched his wife. She was giving only half her mind to the brisk talk about her; her thoughts were elsewhere. Of what? Mortimer's heavy face drew into a frown. He disliked mysteries.

The evening was not particularly successful. Dr. David

was argumentative and insisted on prodding Mortimer about the mine and the convicts when Mortimer wished to discuss neither.

Such discussions between the two men were not unusual, but Mortimer displayed unusual irritation to-night. Doctor David turned to Evelyn.

'How do you find the weather now? Is your head affected any more?' Evelyn smiled in recognition of the threadbare topic. She seemed to have brightened since their coming, but Mortimer could still sense that curtain before her eyes.

Evelyn spoke gayly. 'How about a bridge game?' she questioned. 'And afterward there will be sandwiches. Forget business for a little while and let's enjoy ourselves. It isn't often that we can have a rubber.'

The remainder of the evening passed pleasantly enough and the next day Dr. Richie saw Mortimer again in the latter's office.

'Well?' asked the big man.

Dr. Richie shook his head. 'Nothing. I can see nothing except perhaps a certain air of restraint.'

Mortimer hid his irritation. 'Your eyes are not as keen as I thought them. You found nothing abnormal about her?'

'Nothing except a little preoccupation. Surely that is not unusual in women. Sometimes Selma hardly speaks a word to me for days. You are uneasy over nothing.'

Mortimer shook his head stubbornly and set himself with redoubled determination to discover the source of his uneasiness. At times he was inclined to doubt the evidence of his instinct, but when he sat down to cool analysis of his wife he knew that there was — something.

Women did not change as she had done without reason and there had been no breath of any crisis between them. Mortimer began to spend more time at home; inconspicuously; without discussion.

Patiently he canvassed the weeks that had passed, but without success. Once she had obtained the use of her automobile, she had withdrawn into herself, leaving him behind baffled.

Ah! The automobile! That was the sole change in their manner of living. Perhaps that independence . . .

He began to watch her use of the car, observing how every afternoon she left the house once lunch was finished and did not return until late in the afternoon when shadows were lengthening and the wheeling bats were busy overhead with their nightly foray on gnats. He never questioned her about these absences and she was oblivious of his watching.

Mortimer was untiring. Days stretched into weeks and still he maintained his silent vigil. Once he thought of going to Selma Richie for help and then dismissed the idea. This was not a confidence he could share with another. The weeks became a month. Aloof, silent, introspective, Evelyn Mortimer continued to baffle him, but he did not relax his vigilance.

CHAPTER XI

EVELYN MORTIMER leaned forward and held John Ogletree's glance with her own.

'Let us have an end of fencing,' she said quietly and then sat back to watch his face under the challenge.

There was an interval of silence, broken only by the murmur of the forest and the tinkling chatter of Shoal Creek in its bed of shale. John averted his eyes, choosing to gaze on the water oaks that fringed the little stream where it came tumbling down Honeysuckle Mountain and began its more peaceful way across Limestone Valley to join the Mulberry Fork of the Warrior River.

John still sat behind the wheel of the Mortimer car. They had not troubled to get out when they parked under the fringe of the oaks that sheltered the ford. His hands caressed the polished ash absently. When he turned at last to face the woman at his side, his dark face gave no hint of the disquiet within.

'Very well,' he said. 'I have realized for some time that you were not pleased with me.'

'And you did not wonder why?'

'No.'

Evelyn's lips curved in a smile that was faintly scornful. 'I thought that there was to be no more fencing.'

John's hands gripped the wheel until the ends of his fingers were purple. The color came flooding back to his face. He looked at her levelly.

'I did not wonder why,' he said. 'I could think of no possible reason why you should ——'

'I have not been displeased — merely disappointed.'

'I am sorry.'

'Is that all — just sorry?'

'What more can I ——'

Evelyn moved impatiently in her seat. 'Again I must remind you that we agreed to cease fencing. Have you?'

'No.' Abruptly he became blunt.

'Then why not speak frankly?'

'I? Frankly? Oh, no. You forget who and what I am. That is your privilege, but surely not mine.'

'I confer it on you.'

'I decline the gift,' he said evenly. 'It is not possible.'

She ceased arguing and fell to looking at him instead. Her chin was cupped in her hands; her violet eyes were half-veiled by the long lashes and her delicate, sensitive lips were curved in a smile that he found wistful.

Her face was clearly limned against the background of her hair. John gazed for a moment and then his eyes shifted. Behind her he could see the drooping willows that trailed their tops in the sparkling water. A breeze eddied down from the mountain in vagrant puffs and John caught the fragrance of sweet shrub.

He dreaded this moment; had dreaded it since he had recognized that it was inevitable. He was frightened and yet his determination was as stubborn as when he had first faced the issue with himself. But his courage was not what it had been; he had learned how to cringe . . . since Madison. Abruptly doubt shook him. Was he afraid of a chimera? Would it be better for him if he yielded to . . . He did not finish the thought, knowing the answer already. Evelyn began speaking quietly and perforce his eyes returned to hers.

'I do not think you have played quite fairly,' she said. 'I am disappointed in you.'

John's shoulders went up in a hopeless shrug, but he said nothing.

'I have been waiting — thinking perhaps that I was mistaken, but I have come to the conclusion that . . . I was not. You are not blind . . . and yet we are strangers. You have not met me half way.'

'I have served you the best I could.' John purposely misunderstood her. 'How have I failed?'

'Work! Oh, you've done your work well enough.'

'Was not that all I was supposed to do?'

'I had hoped not,' she said quietly, and raised her eyes to his. The violet eyes had deepened to purple and John saw that one lip was caught by small teeth.

'Will you explain how I have failed?' he said, dropping in-direction. As well face the issue and have done with it.

'Certainly.' Her answer was ready, but she did not begin immediately. Instead she seemed to be listening, her head on one side and her eyes unseeing on his face. Behind her, deep in the forest, came the plaintive cry of a quail thrice repeated. Then her eyes sharpened, her lids lowered and one slim hand began to smooth the rich velour of the seat.

'When I heard you were in prison,' she said, 'I remembered the past. I thought that you needed help and I did what I could because we had once been . . . friends. You came here and I have made things easy for you. I do not remind you of this to exaggerate the value of what I was able to do. I did things; some were not easy. But you were my friend and in prison and I helped in the only way I could. Now, when I am in prison, you are not so generous.'

'You in prison! I do not understand.'

'What you mean,' she corrected, 'is that you do not wish to understand. My prison is not one of physical walls. You need not be so literal. Mine is mental . . .' She gestured vaguely. ' . . . Emotional. I am hemmed in by a personality; my life is circumscribed. You have refused to help me as I tried to comfort you.'

'I am grateful for what you have done,' he muttered and his words sounded ungracious in his own ears. 'Don't think me unappreciative of ——'

'Gratitude!' She was scornful. 'I don't want gratitude.'

'What do you want?' he demanded bluntly.

Her olive face flushed delicately. 'Understanding. Companionship. Appreciation. I want what every woman wants from life. Gratitude is a poor substitute for real emotion.' She paused a moment. 'I suppose I want to feel that I am first with some one; that I come before everything else. I've never had that feeling. One misses it.'

Here was sincerity and John Ogletree matched it, even if he chose his words carefully.

'You have told me to cease fencing. I do not forget that I — I am a convict — that I belong to you. That can wait for a moment. I'll not pretend to misunderstand you. But I wonder if you realize what you are asking me to do to myself.'

'Tell me.'

John found the tenderness of her voice disconcerting. It seemed that she imperceptibly moved closer; but he remained cold. 'You are offering me misery. Mental misery beside which the physical pain I have endured would be child's play.'

'I am not,' she denied in a tense whisper.

'Yes.' John seemed the stronger of the two now. Somehow dominance had shifted to him. He was conscious of it. 'I can have no part in your life. I could not even if I — I were not what I am. You have made your choice, made it deliberately, and I could not interfere. I would have no standing. It would only mean heartache.'

Evelyn pressed one hand against her eyes for an instant and then sat up. She gave a hard little laugh and the slender fingers dropped.

'You haven't even paid me the compliment of sincerity,'

she said bitterly. 'Why didn't you tell me simply that you did not care?'

'It would not have been the truth. I could care. I am human. I'm a man. I respond to the things other men feel. Because I am a convict the blood does not move more slowly through my veins. I could. But I would not allow myself to care because I know the consequences.'

'What are they then?'

'Misery as I told you — for me. The game wouldn't be equal. All the cards would be in your hands. I'm afraid of allowing my feelings to get out of hand. At the cost of unremitting vigilance I have kept my regard for you in due bounds. I intend to see that it remains there.'

'So that it all amounts to this: You are afraid?'

'Yes. I am afraid.' John nodded slowly despite her chilling eyes.

'Of what?'

'Of myself and of you.'

'That is absurd.'

'Perhaps. But true nevertheless. I haven't used the word yet, but I'll use it now. Suppose I let myself love you. What could I hope to gain?'

'Me.'

John shook his head. 'Oh, no. You don't propose anything like that. You don't plan to re-make your life. You don't offer anything but a crumb snatched whenever the risk is not too great. You propose to sacrifice nothing. Knowing that and loving you — what do you suppose it would do to me?'

'I did not know that you were so moral!'

John winced at the sneer but there was no answering edge to his voice. 'The question of morals has nothing to do with it. It is a simple matter of self-protection. The consequences are too painful for what I would gain from it.'

'You hold me cheaply!'

'On the contrary, much more dearly than you know. I know myself. If I once let down the barriers I would break myself against the walls. Knowing that, I do not propose to bruise myself fruitlessly.'

Evelyn smiled without mirth. 'I hardly anticipated such a conclusion. It is not flattering to me, but no matter. It is all a piece with my life.'

'You have no cause to complain of life. You have freedom, a home, money, a husband — everything.' John's voice was scornful. 'What more could you wish?'

'I might answer you "love." Women are not reasoning creatures, John. But I shall not give up hope. At least we understand each other. We shall see how stern is your resolution.'

'Don't tempt me!' John cried quickly. 'I'm human and there are more consequences to this than you realize. You forget my position here. At worst you can leave, but I cannot except in one way.'

'Ah!' Evelyn paused as if struck by a new thought. 'I wonder if that is not an explanation of your restraint.'

'What do you mean?'

'You are even more cautious than I had expected.' Her voice rang and her eyes were chilly. 'You have considered all possibilities, have you not? I remember now.'

'Remember? What?'

'Selma must have frightened you. I recall that she said something of the kind. It is not yourself you fear, but Paul.'

She raised her chin and laughed. Her mirth stung and John moved as if to answer hotly. Then he thought better of it; perhaps this was the easiest way out. Abruptly her laughter ended. She surveyed him scornfully.

'You are afraid of Paul!' she said sharply and seemed disconcerted when he answered simply.

‘Yes.’

‘I see I have done myself too much honor,’ she said savagely. ‘For a moment you almost deceived me. You count consequences early.’

‘Perhaps,’ he agreed quietly. ‘It is one of the things you learn in prison. Can you see things for a moment from my viewpoint? For you, Mortimer’s displeasure is not vital. At the worst you and he would separate and each go your way. For me it is different. Would his displeasure be visited on you? It would not. I would be the one to suffer and there is but one way. The mine! Blood Keller! I’ve seen them go down and not come up.’ He shivered. ‘It’s easy for you to say, but ——’

‘You are afraid,’ she repeated.

‘Yes,’ he answered calmly. ‘I am afraid.’

‘I have misjudged you.’

‘It is easy for you to be scornful. Your back would not feel the whip. You’ve never seen men screaming and writhing under the yard sergeant’s strap; you’ve never seen them come up from the mine and groan all night. You’ve never been in the doghouse. You —— But what’s the use? You have to endure those things to understand them. Yes. I am afraid.’

‘Aren’t you afraid of me?’

‘Yes.’ He did not try to amplify his monosyllable.

‘Suppose I told Paul I was tired of you. Suppose I said that you had been impertinent. Had you stopped to think that Paul is not the only one who can make displeasure felt?’

John’s face turned white. He sat looking down at the wheel under his fingers.

‘If you choose to do that,’ he said at last. ‘Nothing I could say would stop you. And yet, you asked for sincerity and frankness.’

‘So I did.’ Evelyn was quietly unpleasant. ‘Well, it was

merely a suggestion. Suppose you think it over.' Suddenly her manner changed. 'Oh, John!' she cried. 'I didn't mean to say that. You know I'll never harm you; I never could. I don't know what made me do it. But you are so difficult.'

'Not difficult. Only sensible.' John's voice was sober. 'You have reminded me that I am in your hands. I am helpless. Your whim brought me here and your whim can send me to the mine. Convicts are like that.'

'I didn't mean it, John!'

'That doesn't alter matters. You could do it if you chose. You've wondered at my manner. I've always been conscious that I walked along that precipice.'

'There are no precipices with me, John.'

'Yes there are. You haven't hesitated to be brutal to me. Now I'm going to be brutal to you. You think that you care something for me. You don't. You have told me that a clandestine affair between you and me is possible. That isn't love. You just want a thrill; you're bored. There's nothing big about what you propose. If you really loved me, you would not talk of evading your husband. You didn't propose to come to me with clean hands when I had served my own punishment. The thought never entered your mind. You merely proposed a cheap imitation of love that wouldn't survive the first crisis. You'd save yourself and you'd throw me to the wolves if the issue came. Well, I don't propose to put my neck in a noose for that sort of love.'

John had started speaking quietly enough, but before he had finished he was shaking with emotion. His hands clenched and he pounded the steering post. Stirred by her threats his anger overcame him. He turned flaming eyes on her when he had finished and found her sitting quietly, her head thrown back as if in exhaustion; her lids lowered and her hands clasped loosely in her lap.

'I deserve that,' she said quietly. 'You are right. I am answered. Suppose we go.'

He was disquieted by her lack of emotion. He backed out of the nook under the trees and headed the nose of the car toward Silver Lake. It was growing dusk and the purple shadows were gathering along the alder-fringed banks where the water drifted off, chuckling a bit at the prospect of freedom from rock and fall.

The sun had gone down behind Honeysuckle Mountain and the whippoorwills were calling back in the hills. Once an owl hooted almost overhead and John shivered at the eerie sound.

They drove in silence. Once he stole a look at the figure at his side and then looked away quickly at the sight of damp cheeks. He was uncomfortable and yet glad that it was over. At last he knew where he stood. But he considered the future with foreboding. Would her anger return with reflection?

His thoughts were interrupted by a ringing laugh that jangled his nerves. He looked around at her.

'Stop the car for a moment,' she ordered.

He looked at her questioningly even as his feet depressed the pedals.

'Let me have the wheel,' she demanded.

'But — Evelyn — Mrs. Mortimer — why, you — you know ——'

Evelyn laid one hand on the polished ash. 'I know that Paul said I was not to drive,' she said impatiently. 'But I do not choose to obey him. I feel reckless. Besides, he need not know. I shall not tell him. Will you?'

'Of course not!' John was indignant. He read her recklessness aright and a twinge of compunction shook him. He attempted to be placative. 'Please, Evelyn. Some other time. This isn't fair to me. Suppose something happened!'

‘Still afraid of Paul, are you? Well, I take the full responsibility. Let me have the wheel.’

There was a chilly note in her voice, but he persisted. ‘Please, Evelyn. If anything happened ——’

Evelyn’s head went back and she looked at him from under lowered lids. ‘I have asked you twice,’ she said coldly. ‘Must I ——’

Instantly he relinquished the wheel and stepped out of the car. ‘Certainly not. I will save you that embarrassment. I did not mean to presume.’

Without apology she slid behind the wheel and settled herself. ‘Get in,’ she said, a reckless note in her voice. ‘Get in. We’re going home.’

John took his seat and instantly they were off, the powerful motor racing under the insistent pressure of her toe on the accelerator. She misjudged the speed of her engine and clashed the gears, but caught up the slack, slipped from first to second and then to high, and the big car jumped forward.

Her eyes on the road ahead, Evelyn sent the machine racing down the slight incline and then up the other and swung into the wide curves of the road that led to Alamosa.

Once she looked around at John, her eyes alight and her lips parted. ‘This is glorious,’ she shouted above the roar of the engine and the rush of the wind. ‘It gives me a feeling of limitless power. I never realized how badly I wanted to drive again.’

John watched the speedometer apprehensively as the car gathered momentum. Fifteen — twenty — twenty-five — thirty — and then quiveringly to thirty-five for a moment. John ventured a remonstrance.

‘You’re going thirty-five now,’ he cried. ‘I wouldn’t do any better than that. It isn’t safe on this road.’

Evelyn flung him a gay laugh. ‘This takes the clouds from

your mind.' Her voice was shrill with the exhilaration of her speed.

John did not answer. He could understand the feeling that drove her thus to disregard Paul Mortimer's orders and now he understood the reason for Mortimer's forbidding Evelyn to drive. They were traveling at forty-five now. There was nothing he could do. He debated switching off the ignition and braving her wrath, but dismissed the idea with a shrug. He gripped his seat and waited tensely.

Evelyn seemed to have no idea of the danger in sweeping around abrupt bends without slackening speed.

Then it happened! Happened so quickly that it was over before he could cry out a warning.

At fifty miles an hour the heavy sedan swept around a curve. It was almost on top of a small wagon, drawn by a single horse that loitered along the road. John had a glimpse of white childish faces turned toward them in paralyzed terror. He heard a half-strangled cry from Evelyn and turned toward her.

He saw her rise in her seat and tug desperately at the wheel. He felt the car swerve and plunge into the woods alongside the road. Mercifully there was no cliff, he thought, his mind racing and his body poised for the crash.

The machine careened drunkenly. John was hurled against Evelyn and even as he felt the contact of her taut body there was a crash, the sound of splintering glass and the car halted abruptly. The engine was racing and with a fear of fire John's fingers fumbled for the switch.

He picked himself up hurriedly, his first thought of Evelyn. He found her half-lying, half-sitting, her head through the window at her side.

She straightened and he saw that her face was puzzled. His eyes caught something else — a stream of red that trickled down her neck.

‘John!’ she cried, awed surprise in her voice. ‘Look here!’

She held both crimsoned hands toward him as she spoke. Then she collapsed in the seat and before John caught her slid unconscious to the floor.

CHAPTER XII

PAUL MORTIMER, leaving Keller's office, knew that something was wrong when he heard the bellowing, imperious summons of the automobile siren. He recognized his own car and started running for the stockade gates when they swung open and his machine dashed through.

He threw up his hand with a peremptory shout when he saw the crumpled fender, shattered glass and battered radiator, but the car, never slackening its outcry, did not pause.

With a curse, Mortimer jumped to one side and then sprang lightly on the running-board.

'What ——' he began and then paused at the sight of his wife, her blood-stained head in Ogletree's lap. John was driving with one hand and the fingers of the other were pressed deep into the delicate skin of Evelyn Mortimer's neck. Mortimer had time only for a glance when the machine skidded to a stop before the hospital.

Instantly Mortimer took command, asking no questions. Dr. Richie appeared on the porch in answer to the alarm of the siren and to him Mortimer beckoned.

'Mrs. Mortimer has had an accident, doctor,' he said. 'Prepare your operating room. We will bring her in.'

Together they lifted her from the car. 'Careful, sir,' warned Ogletree. 'I'm afraid to release my fingers. The hemorrhage will start again if I do.'

Dr. Richie and Selma were waiting in the tiny room filled with cabinets of gleaming instruments and dominated by a bare white table directly under a skylight. 'Put her there.' Dr. Richie indicated the table and bent over her. 'Lift your fingers!' he ordered John and when the blood welled up: 'Ah! A severed artery. The tissue forceps, Selma.'

John stepped back from the table where Doctor David and Selma bent over the motionless form. Paul Mortimer watched them with impassive face. He heard Doctor David speak in swift savage undertones. 'Hot water!' he demanded once. Again: 'Bandages.' Paul Mortimer caught John's eye and jerked his head.

'Wait outside,' he ordered and John went out to sit on the steps.

He knew now that he was frightened. He tried to recall the moments following the accident and found that he could remember only vague bits of action: The white upturned faces of the children; the way Evelyn's head fell over on her shoulder when he lifted her; his relief when the engine responded to the starter and he found that he could drive; the strain of the race back to Alamosa.

Suddenly he found himself shaking. He drew a crimsoned hand across his forehead, leaving a carmine stain in its wake. He looked down at his clothing covered with the same red stain and shivered. He had been afraid that he would not reach Alamosa in time. Now he was afraid for himself. Mortimer had asked no questions, but he would. What should he tell him?

John was afraid of Mortimer. He had known fear of men before but never fear like this. Mortimer was so emotionless . . . His eyes went right through . . . John shrank at the thought of what the accident might mean. He was not ashamed of his fear. He had been broken by the months in prison; his first thought was of himself.

What should he tell Mortimer? His mind returned to the question from every mental by-path. Would Mortimer blame him? What would Evelyn say?

He sighed; better to tell the truth, he concluded. For a moment he had an idea of telling Mortimer that he had been driving when the accident occurred so that Evelyn

might escape her husband's wrath. The impulse was only momentary. Mortimer would be displeased with her, but that displeasure would not mean the mine. Oh, no! It was best to tell the truth.

Dr. Richie was speaking when he came out the hospital door with Mortimer an hour later.

'You are taking an unnecessary risk,' he said warningly. 'She has lost a great deal of blood and is very weak. It is not wise to move her.'

'But she can be moved?' Mortimer insisted.

'Yes. If it is done carefully. And I will go with you to see that the hemorrhage does not start again.'

'Then we will take her home,' said Mortimer. 'It is impossible for her to remain here with these convicts. You can treat her just as well at my house. I will send to Birmingham for a nurse.'

'That will not be necessary. Selma can stay with her. I suppose I can spare her here and I think Mrs. Mortimer would prefer her to a stranger.'

Mortimer considered for a moment. 'Very well,' he assented. 'I will get a stretcher. Selma can go down in the car.'

'She will want to go home first,' Richie interposed and Mortimer nodded.

'Have Ogletree drive her.'

Mortimer left and Richie returned to the hospital interior. A moment later Selma came out. John had already turned the car and she got in beside him. She did not speak until they had passed the stockade gates.

'You have a good explanation for this, I suppose,' she said finally.

'It wasn't my fault.' John spoke in quick defense. 'I could not help it.'

'Don't tell me that, tell Mortimer.' Selma's tone was dry.

'I shall,' answered John, hiding his misgiving. 'Why don't you ask what happened?'

'Well, what did happen?'

John told her and was further disquieted by her thin smile.

'Will Mortimer believe that?' she asked.

'I don't know.' He shrugged helplessly. 'It's the truth.'

'Yes.' He thought her monosyllable was unbelieving.

'Let us hope for Evelyn's sake that he does believe it.'

'What do you mean?'

They were at the Richie cottage when he asked the question and she did not answer. 'I will be only a minute,' she said and left him to uneasy thought. Soon she returned bearing a small bag and John turned the car toward the Mortimer home.

'I have been expecting something like this,' Selma said, 'though not exactly in this way. You remember I warned you.'

'So you did,' John agreed.

There were no further words between them. At Mortimer's Selma went directly into the house and John drove around to the garage door. He began to take stock of the damage to the car as an ease to his nervousness. Presently he looked up to find Mortimer beside him.

'Well, what happened?' Mortimer demanded without preamble.

'The car struck a tree in trying to avoid a wagon filled with children.'

John had determined his course. He would tell the exact truth; in it lay his salvation. Mortimer looked up at him keenly.

'Who was driving?' he asked.

'Mrs. Mortimer,' John answered.

'Mrs. Mortimer was driving!'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is it customary for her to drive?'

'No, sir. This was the first time she had taken the wheel.'

'Did you understand me when I told you that you were to drive the cars?'

'Yes, sir. But you also said I was to take orders from Mrs. Mortimer.'

'She ordered you to give her the wheel?'

'Yes, sir.'

Again that keen look. John knew that he could not have lied and been convincing. He had an idea that Mortimer was reading his thoughts. The man did not comment for a perceptible space and then:

'You are sure that this is not the result of your carelessness?'

'Quite sure, sir,' John answered steadily. 'I — I warned her that she was going too fast around the curves.'

'Oh! You warned her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'But she did not heed?'

'No, sir.'

Mortimer looked at him intently. 'I see,' he said and turned on his heel to reënter the house, leaving John atremble. He could tell nothing from Mortimer's face.

When Mortimer entered his wife's room he found her conscious, with Selma and Dr. Richie bending over her.

'How do you feel, Mrs. Mortimer?' the doctor asked.

'Very weak,' she answered faintly. 'Were the children hurt?'

Richie looked inquiringly at Mortimer, who answered, 'No. They escaped entirely.'

'And John?'

'Ogletree was uninjured, too,' said Mortimer. His brows drew down and he glanced sharply at Richie and Selma.

Apparently they had missed the significance of the inquiry, but Mortimer had not. So she called him John!

Dr. Richie spoke cheerily. 'You have had a narrow escape, Mrs. Mortimer, but there is no cause for worry now. All you need do is rest quietly. Selma will remain with you and I will look in every day.'

He left with a nod to Selma and Mortimer drew up a chair beside his wife.

'I'm rather curious, Evelyn!'

'Yes,' she whispered huskily. 'What about?'

'The accident, of course. How did it happen?'

'I ran into a tree rather than hit a wagon filled with children.'

'You did!'

'Yes.'

Mortimer pressed his lips together and scanned her face closely. 'You were driving?' he questioned.

'Yes.'

'But you promised me ——'

'I broke it.' Her voice was growing fainter and Selma came to the bedside to look down at her.

'She should not talk now,' she said brusquely. 'If you have any more questions let them keep.'

Mortimer rose. 'Very well,' he said. 'When you are stronger I will speak of this again.'

He returned to the garage where John was still at work over the car. He paused beside him.

'Ogletree, tell me what really occurred this afternoon.'

'I have told you, sir.'

'Really, I cannot use a chauffeur who has accidents.' John's face paled, but he did not answer. Mortimer's look was like a blow. 'I am a just man. I will not punish you for something not your fault. But I will not tolerate lying. Weren't you driving when this happened?'

'I have told you, sir,' John answered. 'Mrs. Mortimer was driving.'

Mortimer looked at him steadily and then lied. 'But she said you were at the wheel.'

John's face grew whiter. 'I can only think that she has been confused by the accident.'

'You have nothing to add?' There was something ominous in Mortimer's voice.

'Nothing, sir.'

'Very good. Get that fender and the radiator off. I'll have new parts from Birmingham to-morrow.'

Mortimer went directly to Keller's office, where he found the warden smoking a perfumed cigarette and reading a luridly illustrated magazine. Mortimer's lip curled when he saw the title — 'Wives' Confessions.' Keller's taste in literature was not high.

The warden's heels came off his desk with a thump when Mortimer entered. 'How is your wife, sir?' he asked solicitously. 'Not badly hurt, I hope.'

'No. Richie seems to think she will be all right,' answered Mortimer curtly. 'Get me this man Ogletree's card.'

When Keller handed it to him he went to his own office outside the prison enclosure. There he shut himself in his private room with a sharp word to his chief clerk.

'I am not to be disturbed.'

Ogletree's card gave him the information required of all convicts. Ogletree had been born in Claybank thirty-two years before. He had practiced law in Birmingham for five years after his graduation from the university. His crime had been embezzlement and he had been sentenced to seven years at hard labor.

Then followed his prison record. All A's — a first-grade convict of exemplary conduct. This was confirmed by the

endorsements of the warden at Madison. 'Quiet. Sullen. Not a trouble-maker. A good workman.'

Mortimer leaned back and lit a cigar. His mind took hold of the problem.

He did not believe Ogletree's story of the accident. He believed that the convict had been driving the automobile. Never had Evelyn disregarded a wish of his so pointedly expressed as had been his order, thinly veiled as a request, that she cease driving. No. Of one thing he was confident. Ogletree had lied. And Evelyn had lied also to protect this lie. Why?

Patiently he fitted the fragments together. Did this have a connection with Evelyn's strangely changed attitude? Was this what his instinct had warned him against? Who was this Ogletree? How had he come to Alamosa?

He remembered perfectly. He had asked Garlock, head of the state convict department, to send him a chauffeur and Ogletree had been chosen. Was not that surprising? Ogletree was not a mechanic. Why had he been selected?

Mortimer knew as well as the convicts that such places were not given without a consideration. What had been the consideration here? Had Garlock been desirous of pleasing some one? Who could it be? Certainly not himself. Not Keller. Only Evelyn remained.

Things that had seemed meaningless now assumed significance in the light of this thought. Could this explain her long silences, her distraught attitude, her lassitude, her indifference, her sudden acceptance of life in Alamosa?

She had called him John!

Mortimer bit savagely into his cigar at the memory. His black eyes glowed and his heavy face grew lowering. One great hand on the desk before him clenched, crumbling Ogletree's record into useless cardboard.

Mortimer stared at the desk before him for a moment. Then he rose abruptly and went to the door.

'Lacey,' he called. 'I am going to Birmingham. I'll leave on the night train. It may be necessary for me to go to Montgomery. I will be away for three or four days.'

Mortimer was not a man for half-way measures.

CHAPTER XIII

JOHN's face grew haggard under the strain of suspense. Each morning he waited for the blow to fall; each night he wondered why it had been withheld. He lived in daily companionship with fear.

Gid Ames saw it and questioned him, but John was reticent; he could not tell Ames the real cause of his misgivings.

'Don't do no good to git riled up 'bout that there orter-mobile,' Ames said. ''F you wan't drivin' I don't see as how Mortimer kin blame you.'

John did not tell him of Mortimer's unbelief, of his doubts regarding Mrs. Mortimer. 'I guess I'll stand it when it comes,' he said. 'It's this damned waiting that gets me. Why doesn't he do what he plans?'

'Cain't do hit 'f he ain't here,' said Ames. The prison kept itself informed about Mortimer. John found, too, that it knew all about the accident. It was not difficult; a friendly guard; a whispered word to one convict and soon all knew that Mortimer's car had been smashed and how.

Skip Collier gloated openly. 'Don't reckon Mr. Mortimer's goin' to like that,' he said, his evil little eyes glinting. ''Twouldn't s'prise me none if we had 'nother loader in this here mine 'fore many days is over.'

John grunted and turned his back, and Ames answered Collier.

'There's worse things nor the mine,' he said placidly. 'Guess you know that, Skip.'

'What do you mean?'

Ames spat accurately at the box of sawdust in the center

of the aisle. 'I ain't sayin' nothin', Skip, but you have to go to see the Cap'n a awful lot.'

Collier turned away with a sneer and Ames spoke encouragingly to John. 'He's used to yore ways and you is used to his'n. I don't reckon' he'll put you in the mine. Mis' Mortimer might have somethin' to say 'bout that.'

John did not answer, but he was not comforted. When Mortimer returned perhaps the suspense would end. His mind cast up the possibilities. Doghouse: mine: solitary: the whip. There was no restraint on Mortimer.

With Evelyn Mortimer convalescing slowly there was little for John to do at the Mortimer home. He kept the cars spick and span and when the new parts for the sedan arrived from Birmingham he installed them with the help of the mechanic from the prison.

Occasionally he went on an errand for Selma Richie, but of Evelyn Mortimer he saw nothing. The days slipped by and still Mortimer did not return. Selma asked John about it one morning when they were alone in the kitchen.

John had just finished breakfast and she had come out for hot water. She looked competent in her white nurse's uniform. John searched wistfully for some sign of kindness in her face but found none.

'How long will Mortimer be gone?' she asked.

'I don't know. How should I?'

'I thought he might have told you when you drove him to Climax.'

'He did not open his lips. Not a word.'

Selma frowned. 'Evelyn is fretting. She does not understand his absence and neither do I. Has anything happened?'

'Nothing but the accident.'

Selma tested the temperature of the water with a tentative finger. 'That is enough,' she said shortly. She looked at John appraisingly. 'What did Mortimer say to you?'

‘Nothing.’

‘Um. Well, go upstairs. Mrs. Mortimer wishes to speak to you.’

John found Evelyn lying near the open window of the airy bedroom that gave a view of Silver Lake and Honey-suckle Mountain. She was dressed in a dainty pink negligée that emphasized the color of her chestnut hair and violet eyes. She appeared white and tired and her eyes were closed when he came in. She opened them at last to look at him.

‘Sit down, John,’ she said, motioning languidly to a chair when he stood stiffly before her. ‘Sit down. This is my first opportunity of thanking you. Dr. Richie told me.’

‘I did what I could,’ John answered. ‘I was sorry it was not more.’

‘Perhaps it would have been better if you had not done so much.’ Evelyn’s voice was weary and her face was wan. She lay with her eyes closed; it seemed that the lids with the long lashes were too heavy to lift. ‘I have something to say to you. Lean closer.’

John bent over her; he caught the delicate fragrance of her hair; her body lay in languorous lines. But he was cold: the sight of her gave him no thrill.

‘Paul is very angry with me, John.’

Ogletree scarcely knew what to say. ‘Perhaps you imagine it.’

‘Oh, no. He left here the night I was hurt and scarcely told me good-bye. I have been lonesome. You know how I feel about Selma. I had to accept her because Paul thinks we are friends and I could not tell him why we disagreed, but she has not helped, John. I have been lonesome. I thought you might have come in to cheer me up.’

‘Think a moment. The answer should be plain to you.’

Evelyn spoke musingly. ‘I know and I don’t seem to care.’

Paul may do as he chooses, but he will find afterward that I shall remember.'

John looked about him uncomfortably. He was eager to escape. He felt stifled in the perfumed air. He was glad when Selma Richie walked briskly into the room with a glass in her hand.

'Time for the tonic, Evelyn.' Then to John: 'I think she has talked enough.'

John rose with alacrity and went out with a backward glance to see Evelyn supported by Selma's arm and drinking from the glass held to her lips. Evelyn's eyes followed him, but he could not interpret the look.

At the garage where he worked half-heartedly on a car that already was spotless Selma came to him a few moments later. She wasted no words.

'I permitted that to-day,' she said curtly. 'I shall not do so again.'

Goaded by her tone, John answered with equal sharpness. 'I shall not complain. I did not invite it to-day.'

Selma looked at him steadily. 'I really believe you mean it,' she commented dryly.

'I do.'

'Afraid, are you? Your kind always is when it is too late.'

'You are unkind — deliberately so, I think. I do not understand. Will you explain?'

'It is not necessary. I have said what I intended. Expect nothing different.'

'Very well,' said John stiffly. 'I prefer it that way.'

Five days slipped by before John received orders to meet the evening train at Climax. Selma gave him the message. 'He telephoned to have you meet him with the little car,' she said.

John was at Climax when Mortimer dropped from the

panting local. They drove to Alamosa in absolute silence. Once John felt Mortimer eyeing him keenly, but he did not speak and, of course, Ogletree volunteered nothing.

Mortimer left the car with a nod toward the garage when they reached home. Inside the house he met Selma Richie in the hall.

'How is she?' he asked.

'Improving, Mr. Mortimer. She has asked for you repeatedly.'

'Humph! In that case I will go up.'

Evelyn greeted him languidly. 'So you decided to come home after all.'

'I came when my business was concluded,' said Mortimer.

'You were successful, I hope.'

'Yes, very,' he said. 'How do you feel?'

Evelyn opened her eyes and there was a faint spark in their violet depths. 'What difference does that make? You have done without knowing for five days.'

'So I have,' agreed Mortimer imperturbably. 'Then it was necessary. Now it is not. If I irritate you, I will leave you.'

She gestured indifferently. 'As you like.'

'I should not like to quarrel within an hour after my return.' There was a gentler note in his voice.

'Do you not think I have a grievance?' Evelyn did not raise her voice. 'I am injured; very badly injured, Dr. Richie says. On the very day that I am hurt you leave me and are gone nearly a week. You were not greatly interested, were you?'

'It was because I was so much interested that I thought going necessary.'

Evelyn turned her head wearily on the pillow. Mortimer saw that there were shadows under her eyes. Her slender neck was swathed in bandages. He rose and came to the

bedside and lifted one listless hand. 'Suppose we talk when you are not so weary.'

She nodded indifferently and he patted her shoulder with fingers that were gentle despite their size. He paused a moment in indecision and then turned toward the door. He was halted at the threshold by her voice.

'Dr. Richie says that I owe my life to Ogletree. Have you said anything to him?'

Mortimer came back at that and sat down again. His face was impassive and his voice was without feeling when he answered.

'I have hardly had time.'

'Don't you think that we should do something for him? It is an obligation of a sort.' Her voice was faintly ironical but Mortimer did not acknowledge it in his reply.

'What do you suggest?'

'I don't know. Can't you help him? A parole or a pardon. I thought you would know.'

'I do. Suppose you leave that to me. Ogletree shall have what he deserves.'

She seemed satisfied with that and Mortimer left. He lifted one hand to his moustache and glanced backward as he closed the door. Evelyn was lying with veiled eyes.

Mortimer was unusually attentive to her in the days that followed. She recovered strength slowly. It was two weeks after the accident that Mortimer brought her downstairs to the living-room carrying her easily in his powerful arms.

Selma walked quietly in the background and when Evelyn was safely ensconced in a window seat she left them alone. Evelyn glanced about.

'I feel as if I had been ill a year,' she said. 'Why the flowers?'

'I had them sent from Birmingham. I thought you would like them.'

'That was thoughtful of you. Let me have them, please.'

Mortimer handed her the roses and she buried her face in them. 'Thank you,' she said simply.

Mortimer spoke cheerfully. 'I brought you something else that I have been saving until you were in a more cheerful mood.'

Evelyn's eyebrows went up. 'I am cheerful now. What is it?'

'A shawl. I got it in Montgomery. Garlock was just back from Mexico City and he brought it with him.'

He spread it over her knees. It was riot of color and the silk was of marvelous softness. Her hands caressed it. 'You make me wonder, Paul.'

'Wonder! Why?'

'You are so thoughtful in some things and understand so little in others.'

'Well, I'm only a man. But I am more understanding than you think. Have you ever shown that you particularly wanted understanding?'

'All women want understanding.'

He grunted and spoke abruptly. 'Hasn't Selma been pretty closely confined?'

'She has been with me all the time. Selma has been very kind and patient. It has not been easy for her.'

'Exactly. I have an idea. Oh, Selma!'

'Yes, Mr. Mortimer.'

'Will you please tell Ogletree to come here?'

John came in and there was apprehension under his quiet exterior. Mortimer's keen eyes saw that Evelyn did not look at him. Ogletree's gaze was steadily on Mortimer.

'How are the cars?'

'Both in good shape, sir.'

'Very well.' Mortimer turned to Selma. 'Get your hat and coat.'

‘But ——’

Mortimer smiled. ‘I’m going to send you out for some fresh air. You need a little diversion and I’ll entertain your patient while you are out.’

‘You are very kind, Mr. Mortimer, but ——’

‘No protest now,’ he said. ‘It is needless to have two cars and a chauffeur and see you droop for lack of air. Ogletree!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Drive Miss Richie about Silver Lake and do not hurry. You should take about two hours.’

‘Very well, sir.’

Mortimer stood at the window and looked after them as they drove off. Then he turned back into the room with a sharp glance at Evelyn.

‘I have an idea,’ he said.

‘Yes?’

‘You spoke of wanting to do something for Ogletree. I agree with you. Have you ever thought that he was interested in Selma Richie?’

‘Certainly not!’

‘You have overlooked something then. I’ve watched him when he looked at her. I think he is partial to your nurse and I’m going to help him.’

His lips curved in a faint smile as he looked at her. Her flush did not escape him, but she only said quietly:

‘I think you are mistaken. Selma does not care for him at all.’

‘Perhaps not now. I was speaking of his feeling. She might respond if she knew him better and that is impossible unless she sees him. I shall make that possible. Ogletree interests me.’ He spoke dispassionately. ‘Imagine what humiliation he must endure. He is a man of education and culture. Yet he has never shown by word or sign that he feels his disgrace. A man who can hide his emotions like

that — well, as you say, we owe him something and I'm going to make it possible for him to have his chance with her. Selma has always been interested in these men in Alamosa, but she has never met one like him. If they know each other better ——'

'But why tell me all this?'

'Because you must have a part in it. Your opportunities for throwing them together will be more plentiful and less pointed than mine.'

'You don't know women,' Evelyn said scornfully.

'I know some women — better than they think.'

'You mean Selma?'

'Perhaps.'

Evelyn smiled derisively, her eyes veiled. 'The rôle of matchmaker is new to you.'

'Wait and see. Will you help?'

'Of course.'

There was a glint of admiration in Mortimer's eyes as he looked at her. He rose and went to the window to hide his smile.

If she could have read his thoughts she would not have been so complacent. Mortimer's eyes were calculating. He had set the pieces in motion. Now to await results.

CHAPTER XIV

HIS first ride with Selma Richie was not unpleasant for John, for she did not ride in the front seat, and her aloofness left him leisure for thought.

He was beginning to hope faintly that the accident would bring no consequences in its wake. Had Mortimer merely been trying to frighten him? It was not like the man, but still . . . the accident was now weeks past and nothing had been done.

In some ways he had profited from the change in his routine of life. He was relieved from the constant strain of seeing Evelyn Mortimer. The constraint had become almost unbearable and after that last day before the accident — what would her attitude have been? Unpleasant, he thought, with a wry smile.

It was not until he halted before the Mortimer home and sprang out to open the door for Selma Richie that it occurred to him that they had been driving two hours in absolute silence. Nor did she break it now, but hurried up the flagged walk without a word or glance.

He drove slowly around to the garage and his thoughts lingered with Selma. He found himself vaguely stimulated by the astringent of her brusqueness; she was wholesome with all her curtness. He could breathe freely in her presence; one did not need to search for hidden meanings in her words. She was like a wind from the mountains; chill, but bracing and honest.

He wondered for whom she reserved her tenderness. A woman of such dynamic personality must have it hidden under the coldness of her exterior. Was it called forth only

by such men as Gideon Ames? Gid, now, never tired of singing her praise and the one rift between them was John's sour acquiescence in the glowing words.

'You jus' don't know her,' the mountaineer argued. 'Y'ain't rightly saw her. You wait.'

John had been bitter that day. 'I've seen all of her I want,' he said curtly. 'She has no use for me and I don't go out of my way to invite ——'

'You wait, son. Wait 'till you really know that gal. She's got a heart in her just like one of them pines on Dogwood Mountain.'

John shrugged and let the subject drop. But he was curious about Selma Richie. He speculated about the enigma of her coldness and her unsparing castigation of himself, but he never obtained a satisfactory answer.

Day followed day and each afternoon he was summoned to the Mortimer living-room and there bidden to drive Selma Richie into the country about Alamosa. Always he was informed how long he should be away.

Gid Ames was in a fair way to have his wish that Selma Richie should be known to John if constant contact could do it, Ogletree reflected that afternoon while he waited for Selma to come down the flagged walk from the Mortimer porch and join him in the car. But, really, the contact was more apparent than real. He knew as little about Selma Richie now as on the very first day he had seen her. She was still cryptic, still inscrutable, unbelievably taciturn. In the days he had been driving her, she had not spoken a half-dozen words to him.

John, by now, admitted that Selma was interesting. Her impenetrable reserve, her infinite capacity for silence, the sheer strength of her personality arrested his attention. He had made tentative overtures, but when these were received with silence he had subsided, abashed.

Now, unexpectedly, she spoke. They were driving on the far side of Silver Lake and John had turned into the trail that led along Five Mile Creek. Selma was in the rear seat as usual and he caught an occasional glimpse of her face in the mirror above his head. It was distraught, her features in reflective lines, her eyes absent.

'Stop here,' she said.

He slowed and halted under the oaks that bordered the road. He knew the spot. The path at his right led to the Rock House. Once he and Evelyn had gotten out of the car and she had shown him the huge boulder, honeycombed with caves. They had even explored the dark interior of the largest cavern before turning back.

He sat now without turning, waiting further orders.

'This is growing rather ironic,' Selma said.

Surprised, he turned in his seat to find her smiling coldly.

'What do you mean?'

'These afternoon rides. This solicitude that I do not lack fresh air. The constant command that I use the car — and the chauffeur.'

John shrugged. 'That's not my affair. I follow orders.'

'Oh! You don't think it your affair. Are you really as stupid as you appear or is that only a pose?'

'I honestly don't know what you mean.'

Her speech was brutal. 'No wonder you are in Alamosa! How did you ever escape so long?'

He flushed, but said nothing.

'Prison has dulled your perceptions,' she said at last. 'Perhaps it will be a kindness not to enlighten you. At least, I shall not do it.'

'I hardly expected kindness from you.'

'Oh, yes. Occasionally. When I think it deserved.'

'You have never thought me deserving before now?'

'I have not thought anything about you.'

‘You must to have been so unkind.’

Selma looked directly at him. Her frosty blue eyes under the level brows were very penetrating. She studied his face and her lips curled. ‘Why trouble to attempt deception? You will get nothing from me. I shall not let you see her. She will send for you when she wants you.’

‘She?’

‘Evelyn Mortimer. I shall not allow myself to be used.’

John’s dark face whitened and his eyes narrowed. ‘Always you bring that up,’ he said. ‘I could tell you — but what’s the use! You wouldn’t believe me. I do not wish to see Evelyn Mortimer. I — I — God, how I wish she had left me at Madison!’

‘You don’t really wish that.’

‘But I do!’

‘No. I know men like you. I’ve studied them and I’ve had some experience with them. You say that only because you are frightened. Let that pass and you’ll go right back. Your vanity is moved; it gives you a delightful thrill to know that a woman will defy convention for your sake. You take advantage of her and it is doubly contemptible in your case because you are a convict.’

‘Thank you. That is the third time you have said that to me. I wonder if it ever occurred to you that you might be mistaken — that I *might* be an exception?’

‘When a man talks one way and acts another I have no choice but to believe his actions.’

‘Even when he is not a free agent? Why should you go over all this ground? Haven’t you rubbed enough salt in the wound? Why keep it up? Am I so important that you should punish me all the time?’

‘My father is a surgeon,’ she said and he stared.

‘What do you mean by that?’

'Sometimes it is necessary to inflict a wound to cure a graver one. I leave you to think it over.'

It was the kindest word he had ever had from her and he cherished it even if he did not understand.

'I — I wonder if I might say something to you, something you may think presumptuous — you probably will?'

'Certainly you may.'

He hesitated, stammered and at last fell silent. 'I — I guess I'm afraid.'

'Afraid! But I cannot hurt ——'

'I didn't mean physically. I'm afraid of being hurt, I guess. I'm pretty lonely: I — I've been a lot by myself.'

'I thought that was what you wanted?'

'I thought so, too,' he answered simply. 'Until I got it.'

She looked at the watch on her wrist. 'It's time we were getting back.'

It might have been fancy, but he thought that her tone was a shade less brusque. If he could just win her tolerance he would prize it. Unaccountably he wanted to change the cool disdain in her eyes when she looked at him. Then he remembered that he was a convict. Well, others who had penetrated her reserve had been convicts.

If he could only convince her that he had no sentimental interest in Evelyn Mortimer; that he was fiercely resentful of that woman's partiality; that he was afraid of her and desired nothing so much as to avoid all contact with her — if he could do that, perhaps her attitude might be less unfeeling.

He set himself studiously to the task and he was not without opportunities. Each day he and Selma were alone in the car. Tentatively at first he tried conversational overtures and was not dismayed when they were at first rebuffed.

Gid Ames was responsible for that. 'She's just like a old coon dog I had named Hoecake,' Gid said when John con-

fided his difficulties. 'Hoecake'd sound like she'd tear you all to fritters — but hell, her bark was a whole lot worse'n her bite. Mis' Selma's like that too. Y'know, ef you take holt of a stingin' nettle kind of tetchy, hit'll give you hell, but if you grab it like you didn't give a damn 'twon't be nigh as bad. That's the way with her.'

And John found it so. Progress was slow but he was not discouraged. At least it gave him something to think about. He accepted her brusque speeches, discounted her curtness and ignored her slashes at himself. He was progressing, he thought.

Of the Mortimers he saw little. He knew that Evelyn was gaining strength slowly. Mortimer usually sat with her when Selma went for her ride. John saw little of the master of Alamosa and was content to have it so. By now he had gotten over his fright from the accident. He regarded it as a thing of the past. Nothing further had been said by Mortimer, although John drove him to Climax at times.

And then, on his return from one of these drives to carry Mortimer to Climax, Selma Richie appeared in the kitchen door and called him.

'Evelyn wants you,' she said.

He thought there was something queer in her face, but he went to the interview without foreboding. He found Evelyn in the huge living-room, reclining on a couch, apparently much better, but still in negligée. She looked him over appraisingly and her eyes were cool.

'I hear that you have been busy,' she said abruptly.

'Busy?' His stare was bewildered.

'Yes. Busy with the car. But the strain has not told on you.'

He reverted to an attitude of submission that he knew was not soothing. 'I do what I am told,' he said.

'You forget easily.'

John was puzzled. She was speaking with unnecessary heat. Her tone was almost passionate. Her wide forehead was frowning and her violet eyes were fully unveiled; they flashed when they encountered his.

‘But I don’t understand.’

‘Of course not. Where have I heard that before? You never understand anything. Well, I shall make myself unmistakable, I hope. I shall certainly try.’

Dumbly John waited. He knew women well enough even out of his scanty experience not to attempt argument.

‘I said that you forget easily,’ Evelyn repeated.

‘I know. And I do not understand you. Therefore I remain silent.’

‘You have forgotten why you were brought to Alamosa at my request.’

‘On the contrary, it has never been absent from my thoughts for a moment.’

‘Then what you have done has been deliberate. Do not think you can hide it from me. I may not appear to have been watching but I have seen everything. I have seen how you looked, how you acted, and her response. I have been at the window here frequently.’

John’s temper had not been entirely broken. He found it hard to submit to bullying.

‘If you will stop speaking in riddles and tell me wherein I have offended I shall apologize,’ he said crisply. ‘Or if that is not sufficient I will plead guilty and suffer the punishment. Until you read the indictment I cannot plead.’

Evelyn sat up and drew her negligée closer about her. Her face was hard and she breathed rapidly.

‘You invite plain speaking. Good.’ Her words were fierce. ‘John Ogletree, you were not brought here to amuse another woman.’

Abruptly enlightenment came to John and he cursed him-

self for his stupidity. Nevertheless he chose to continue in it for a time.

‘You must speak even plainer than that,’ he said quietly.

‘I shall, never fear.’ Her words were winged with venom, though she did not raise her voice. ‘I think you are growing over-interested in Selma Richie, John.’

John looked at her and smiled derisively. ‘Absurd! If you only knew ——’

Evelyn spoke rapidly, unheeding his interruption. ‘Now, I won’t have that, John! I have my share of pride — more, I think, than the average woman. I have suffered it to be outraged, but I won’t have it crucified. She is not for you, John. I shall see to that.’

Abruptly her vehemence left her and she sank back among the cushions. There was a moment of visible struggle and then the lines smoothed out of her face, her violet eyes opened and her voice once more became languid. With a shiver of inward aversion, John thought her change feline; but she could punish and he sobered.

‘You are being cruel,’ he said.

‘Cruel?’ She smiled lazily at the idea.

‘Yes. You said you brought me here to amuse you. Do you find amusement in another’s pain?’

She smiled slowly and John shivered. ‘I can imagine circumstances under which I could,’ she said coolly.

‘What circumstances?’ he asked steadily.

She did not answer directly. ‘I brought you here to amuse me, not to amuse another woman. Are you answered?’

‘In a measure. Since you have a definite plan for me here, suppose you tell me what I may do and what I may not.’

‘You are not to become interested in Selma Richie, John. I won’t have it.’

‘And why, may I ask?’ John’s tone was low, but his eyes

burned into the violet ones that met them steadily. His anger was mounting. He foresaw whither all this was leading and he was already preparing himself for it.

‘Why? Because I do not wish it. While I may play with fire myself, I have no desire to see others burned.’

‘And if I do not choose to obey?’

‘There is always the mine and Blood Keller,’ she said, tossing out a languid hand and smiling at him. ‘You don’t know women very well, John, or you would not risk my anger.’

John stood very erect; his cheeks were white and he did not look at her when he began to speak, his voice low and vibrant.

‘This is the second time you have threatened me with the mine. It shall be the last. It is the worst you can inflict. At least that is but pain of the body. The alternative you offer is hell. The mine is cheap beside it. There is always the mine, you say. Then send me to the mine if you choose. I am awake. I can endure it. Other men have. But this thing I could not endure. Do I make myself clear?’

‘You do,’ she said icily. ‘You may go.’

He went out, his head high — but fear tugged at him. His declaration of independence was like to cost him dear.

CHAPTER XV

BEFORE he entered the stockade that night John Ogletree paused and looked about him. He was gazing his last on the outside world: he knew it. He had the ominous feeling of impending disaster. He looked long at the mountains dimly outlined in mysterious heights in the semi-darkness. He snuffed the breeze that blew damp and cool off Silver Lake, telling of lilies and water reeds and the sedge grass that filled the shallows. Then, with a shake of his shoulders, he turned inside and went steadily to his bunk.

He was very quiet and even Gid Ames, no great talker himself, commented.

'Whut's the matter, son?'

'Nothing,' John answered. He wanted to think and had no wish for Ames's kindly sympathy.

Evelyn Mortimer seemed alien to him; unfeeling; selfish. Once he had been grateful to her for relief from the maddening routine of Madison. Now gratitude was swept away in the certainty of what was to come.

There was nothing gracious about her. Selma Ritchie's cold directness was easier to bear. He could understand that. Evelyn Mortimer was feline. He wondered dully what she would tell Paul Mortimer; not the truth certainly.

He was afraid, but he was not regretful. His body cringed from the future, but the months in the open had brought new strength. The soddenness of Madison had left him; his spirit had come back. He wanted freedom. God! how he wanted it! But he would not purchase it at that price.

The pain of disillusionment was mixed with physical fear for he had not realized how greatly he cared for Evelyn Mortimer until she had revealed herself.

He wondered if he had been wise in burning his bridges. He need not have done that; he could have dissembled; he could have lied to her. Would he be sorry that he had not?

Soberly he told himself that he would be sorry, but now he was glad that he had taken the irrevocable step. He had made temptation impossible.

He was very contemptuous of himself for his fear. He hated himself for dreading the morrow; he did not realize that he had risen superior to his fear. He was obsessed with the idea that it was cowardly to be afraid and he was very bitter as he lay wide-eyed long after the convicts around him snored raucously.

He woke early nor was he greatly surprised to find a guard at his elbow before he had finished straightening his bunk and arranging his effects in the prescribed order.

'The Cap'n wants you,' the guard told him curtly. 'Snap into it. He don't like to be kept waitin'.'

'I know,' said John dully. 'I'm ready now.'

They found Binford Keller in his office, his hair carefully parted, his purple shirt ironed, his linen immaculate and his trousers falling into creases above his sharp-toed cordovan shoes. As John entered he laid aside his perfumed cigarette. At a motion the guard left them alone.

'Ogletree, isn't it?' Keller fluted.

'Yes, sir,' answered John, bracing himself.

'Well! Well! I'm sorry about this, Ogletree. Very sorry. But such things can't be helped, can they?'

John wondered what he had been told. 'No, sir.'

'Now, Ogletree, you've never been in a mine before, I understand.'

John's last hope left him. It was the mine! But he had expected it and hid his fear. 'No, sir,' he answered steadily.

Again Keller was musically regretful. 'Too bad! Just when we need experienced miners.' Keller shook his head

over the prospect. His eyes scanned John politely and the convict shivered under the colorless gaze. John was daunted in spite of Keller's courtesy. The warden spoke again.

'You must do the very best you can when you get in the mine. Really, I'm sorry that you haven't had more experience. The mine is always particularly trying on new men. But then you must learn rapidly. You will learn, won't you?'

He peered at John in polite inquiry, a bland smile on his lips and one hand lifted in suave gesture. John found him sinister. He read the hidden menace under the other's smiling questions.

'Yes, sir, I'll learn as fast as I can,' he said.

Keller nodded approvingly. 'I'm glad of that. It is troublesome teaching men. You've no idea how annoying it is — to them and to us. But we have good instructors here. So you learn rapidly and do your tasks. It really is too bad that you must go into the mine. I regret it. I've heard of you; you'd be surprised how much I've heard of you, and it is deplorable that you must dig coal. But then the best of us suffer misfortune.'

John did not know what to say and remained silent. Keller pressed a buzzer and the guard answered. Keller picked up his cigarette and fell to polishing his nails. He pointed at John.

'He will start at six tons as usual. Take him to the store and outfit him. You have a blank check number.' John followed the guard, but Keller did not let him go without a final thrust. 'Good-bye, Ogletree,' he said musically. John wondered what he meant by that.

It was not really a store that furnished John his mine clothes, but a store room where a white-clad convict issued John overalls and jumper, rubber shoe packs, cap and carbide lamp, a cutting pick and a huge eighteen-inch shovel.

'Bring 'em all over to the washroom,' the guard ordered.

There John changed clothing. Henderson, the guard, showed him how to fill his lamp with water, adjust the needle valve that fed the gas to the burner and how to light it with the flint on one side of the reflector.

'Now come on,' he urged impatiently. 'You got six tons to load before you come out and the quicker you get to it the sooner you'll be out.'

Henderson led the way out of the washroom and across the stockade yard. He halted where an iron framework projected above the ground and a ladder led into the opening.

'This here's the manway,' he growled. 'You goes down and comes out by this. It hits the main slope down here apiece.'

It was John's first time underground and everything was strange. The light from his cap confused him and he stumbled when the manway pitched downward abruptly a few feet from the foot of the iron ladder. The guard hurried ahead without a backward glance and John had difficulty in keeping pace with him.

The roof of the manway was low and John was forced to stoop to avoid striking his head. He felt the tug of the air about him and heard the first sough of the mine that was to grow familiar in days to follow. The distance seemed interminable. Stooping low, he followed his guide in darkness that seemed oppressive. The mine was cool, but John was sweating profusely before he had tramped fifteen minutes. He fancied he had difficulty in breathing but knew that it was imagination only.

The stooping posture necessitated by the low roof became irksome, then painful, and then agonizing. He was gasping as he hurried after Henderson. He wanted to stop and rest but the guard did not pause and John feared to ask. Would

they never come to a place where they could stand erect? Sharp pains shot through John's back. He wondered if he could straighten if he had the opportunity and doubted it.

Just when he thought that he would fall from weariness the guard came out into the main heading and John stood erect with a sigh of relief. They went through a brattice and came onto the slope. There was a fierce rush of air that almost overturned John and that frightened him for a moment, but Henderson did not notice.

Walking was easier along the tracks and John's back began to ache less cruelly. He could see little in the impenetrable blackness that was emphasized rather than dispelled by the lamps on their caps.

It seemed to John that he had been going down hours when at last Henderson turned off the main slope into a passage-way and went through another brattice. Again they were forced to walk half bent. Down this passage they stumbled until after another eternity they came to where lights flickered ahead of them and John was conscious of figures.

When they approached closer John distinguished men, and in one corner a mule attached to a mine car. Henderson paused and raised his voice.

'You, Collier!' he called.

'Here I be,' a voice answered and one of the lights moved toward them.

'Here's a new man. You've got a blank check number, haven't you?'

'Yes, sir,' Collier answered and John distinguished the underlying snarl that was always present in his voice.

Collier took his light from his cap and flashed it in John's face. He recognized him and chuckled evilly.

'Danged if it ain't the pet. What you doin' down here?'

Henderson answered before John could open his lips. 'Mr.

Keller said he was to work in your gang. He's a fourth-class man with six tons to get. I'm turning him over to you.'

'All right, sir. I'll see to him all right.'

The two stood while Henderson disappeared into the darkness. When his light had winked out Collier laughed harshly.

'This shore is luck. Bo', I been honin' for this, but I never thought it'd come. I thought you was in soft. Well, you ain't in soft no more.'

John did not answer, but inwardly his spirit rose to meet the hatred in the other's voice. He shook off Collier's fingers when the check-runner laid a hand on his arm.

'You gonna have more to them arms 'fore you kin handle six tons a day,' Collier said. 'Six tons is a awful lot of coal. Well, don't stand there gawpin'. You got your pick and shovel. Come on here with me. I'm gonna put you right close up to the entry where I kin keep my eyes on you. I figger you're gonna need it.'

John followed him a little further down the track and then turned into another narrow passage which widened after a few steps and then ended. A mine car stood on the tracks near the coal.

'All your shootin' 's done for you,' Collier explained. 'All you gotta do at first is load. I'll show you 'bout undercuttin' this afternoon. This here car holds two tons and you gotta load three of 'em to git your task. An' up top they look to me to see that you do it. I got six men on my checks and I look after 'em all, but I'm gonna look after you special. Get busy.'

John took off his jumper and picked up the shovel, an eighteen-inch blade attached to a short handle. He scooped up a load of coal and turned to dump it into the car but Collier darted down on him.

'Here! You damn fool. Don't you know better 'n that?

'Bout half of what you got is rock. You go to loadin' rock an' you'll wind up in the doghouse. You gotta pick your coal first. You throw the rock out.'

'But how do you tell the rock?' asked John helplessly.

'Here. Look at this. The rock's gray and the coal is black. Also rock is heavier 'n coal. You can't git the little pieces but you git all the big pieces 'cause they watch it close up top.'

John pawed around in the mass of broken coal. Collier pointed out the rock and John piled it on one side. Then he took his shovel again and began to load. Collier watched in silence for a time and then prepared to leave.

'When you git this car loaded, push it out to the front of the room. I'll have you a 'nother car ready. When you git your loadin' done, I'll show you 'bout cuttin' for the shootin' this afternoon.'

Collier left him alone and John was glad: the man's evil presence disconcerted him. The pain in his back was eased and he looked around the narrow little room. Behind him the entry was dark and fearsome; a rock fragment fell from the roof with a tinkling clatter and he started at the volume of the sound; very faintly his ears caught the trickle of water and in his nostrils was the cool, damp smell of the mine.

John shrugged his shoulders wearily. Evelyn Mortimer had done this. In a moment of anger she had condemned him to this. Painstakingly he adjusted his mental balance to meet the new conditions of life. There could be no rebellion; he must endure it as best he could. What other men had done, he could do, but he shrank at the prospect before him.

Then he realized the uselessness of fear and to his aid summoned all the courage of his nature. For an instant he thought of Gideon Ames. To-night he could talk to him and Gid would help.

John leaned over and thrust the shovel under the coal and tossed it into the car . . . He swung the shovel as fast as he could, with a sort of breathless haste to have done. It was backbreaking work and muscles unaccustomed to strain protested sharply, but he did not heed. He was too intent on getting his task. He knew what failure meant; he had seen convicts who had failed.

It seemed impossible to fill the car. He toiled with the heavy shovel until his movements became mechanical. His body was drenched with sweat and his lungs labored, but he kept on doggedly. His movements grew slower as his aches increased.

The coal was in great lumps. Some of these he lifted with his hands and tossed into the car. Others he was forced to break with the pick. He was scarcely able to stand in the room where the roof was little higher than the top of the car and this cramped him in handling the larger lumps.

At last, however, the car was filled and he trundled it out to the entrance to the slope and sat down for a few blessed moments. His rest was brief, however, for Collier appeared promptly and scanned the car and then John. He grunted non-committally.

'Figgered it was 'bout time you had a car. That's two tons. You're through a third of your job.'

John watched while a driver and a mule came with an empty car, which was pushed into the room while the loaded one trundled away at the heels of the mule. John was reluctant to rise. His back felt as if it would break if he moved, but he struggled to his feet at Collier's command.

'All right. Git busy. There ain't no loafin' in my entry.'

John again swung his shovel. He could lift it little more than half full. At this rate it would require an interminable time to fill the car. Sweat ran down into his eyes but he did not pause to wipe it away. His thoughts were smothered now

under the agony of fatigue and he had no time for any other sensation.

It seemed that he worked hours before he noticed that the car was nearly full. He toiled with set teeth. Long since he had forgotten everything save the yawning car. The past faded out and the future appeared dim and indistinct. He had one object — to fill the car and gain a few moments' surcease from the pain that bit at his shoulders, paralyzed his arms, and made him dizzy.

At last it was done and he pushed the loaded car to the room entrance and fell rather than sat beside it. He lay gasping, his head in his arms. For a moment things went black, blacker even than the darkness of the mine, punctured by the light from his cap that he placed to one side. His breath came in sobbing gasps.

His respite was all too short. Again Collier appeared. Again an empty car was pushed into the room. John stumbled weakly to his feet and groped along in its wake, feeling along the wall and leaning heavily against the timbering.

Collier departed without a word. John had lost all measure of time. It seemed an eternity since he had found that he was doomed to the mines. But one thought possessed him now — to struggle through the loading of the coal on this last car. Could he survive that?

John picked up his shovel and thrust it under the coal. It was a terrible strain to lift and he wondered that he could. Only fear drove him now. He clenched his teeth to keep back a cry at each movement.

Stumbling, slipping, gasping, fighting — in some way John accomplished the miracle of that last car. He was almost unconscious when it was done. He had a new pain now — his hands. They were a mass of blisters, raw from the chafing of the shovel handle. The original blisters

had burst and others formed and felt as if they were on fire.

John was mumbling incoherently to himself when the car was at last loaded. There was a great thankfulness in his heart when he realized it. Now he was wiser. Instead of pushing the car to the entrance of the room he fell beside it and lay there panting. He was through! The day was over! He could think of nothing but that. He forgot other days that stretched before him. He would fear those later — now he was conscious of but one thing: he was through for the day. He could rest.

John never knew how long he lay beside the car, his face contorted, his tongue thick and his mouth dry. At last he stumbled to his feet and groped his way to his dinner bucket where he knew there was water. He poured a little into his hands and washed his face. The cool water felt grateful, but stung his hands and he held his light down to look at them. They were raw and puffed and trembling.

There was a trace of exultation in John as he replaced his lamp in his cap. He had done it. There was nothing to fear on the surface now.

He pushed the car to the room entrance and sat down to wait. It was not long before Collier appeared. John thought he showed surprise at the sight of the loaded car. The driver came and carried it away and then Collier turned to John.

‘Come on now and I’ll show you ’bout the undercuttin’,’ he ordered.

The bleakness of despair descended again on John as he rose painfully. He was not through. There was more to be done. He tottered when he stood erect and put out a hand to steady himself. He stood for an instant gathering his courage and then followed Collier back to the room.

‘You gotta cut your coal so that when the shootin’ crew

comes in here to-night they can sink their holes,' the check-runner said. 'You dig it out close to bed rock so that the powder will break it off the face. Here. I'll show you.'

John watched miserably as Collier swung the pick with practiced hands. He cut away the coal from the face so that there was a hollow under it. John saw with dismay that it would require working on his knees. Was not the loading the worst then?

Collier straightened at last and surrendered the pick. 'Now lemme see you do it.'

At first, John's efforts were awkward. He had never before handled a pick and he was desperately tired. The pick felt as if it weighed a ton. His hands were on fire and a heavy weight rested on the back of his neck. But he persisted under Collier's watching eyes. It was slow work for Collier corrected him frequently and often he was forced to pause for breath. But it was done at last and he struggled to his feet, swaying, wondering what was next.

'That's all,' said Collier. 'Git on up to the top.'

Afterward John had little recollection of the long walk to the top. Once he found himself crawling on hands and knees, panting and sobbing in the struggle. He found his way upward foot by foot until ahead of him he saw the welcome gleam of the manway entrance. Just beyond that was water and a bed. He broke into a stumbling run . . . One thought . . . rest . . .

The chill iron of the manway ladder felt grateful to his macerated hands as he climbed painfully toward the light. He came dizzily out into the open air and blinked about him, swaying slightly.

His dulled eyes were held by a little group of people who stood near the barracks steps and watched him. He drew a hand across his face as if to clear his sight and looked again.

Evelyn Mortimer! She leaned on her husband's arm and talked to Keller. And that other figure? Selma Richie.

It was like a match to a powder train. The agony and misery of the day were concentrated in this moment. All his resentment and hatred of Evelyn Mortimer and her heartlessness flamed up in him.

His thick tongue mouthed a bitter curse and he lurched forward, his eyes blazing.

He did not see that Mortimer was watching him.

CHAPTER XVI

JOHN OGLETREE halted before the little group and stood peering at it as if striving to pierce some mist that enveloped him as he stood, swaying a little, his head thrust forward and his eyes unerringly on Evelyn Mortimer.

The carbide lamp still burned in his cap, throwing a shadow over his features through which his eyes blazed. His face was white where his features were not covered by smears of coal dust and his lips were drawn into a bitter sneer.

He loomed huge before their eyes — his tall figure enlarged by the loose overalls and jacket that hung on his frame.

Evelyn Mortimer had looked up idly, her eyes on John while she gave absent ear to Keller. Then she gasped as recognition came and one hand lifted to her throat. Following her eyes Keller saw the convict.

Before he could move to rebuke him, he felt Mortimer's hand on his shoulder and turning, met a frown that enjoined silence. Mortimer was standing a little apart, watching the man and the woman, his teeth showing in a faint smile and his eyes roving from one to the other.

Selma Richie watched them all. She looked from John Ogletree to Mortimer and then to Keller. She saw Mortimer's frown of warning and realized its meaning. Her gaze swung back to Ogletree and there was compassion in her face. The look changed her, softened the severity of the level brows and warmed her blue eyes.

The tableau held unbroken for seconds. Selma saw the whole: Evelyn's strained attitude: John's bitter face: Mor-

timer watching with a sardonic smile and Keller licking his lips in anticipation.

Her eyes wide, Evelyn Mortimer stared at John's accusing face and shrank under the blazing eyes that pierced the blackness of his features.

Then John spoke, his voice husky, his words slow, his tongue thick.

'Came to see me, did you?' he said. 'Well, look!'

With the words he thrust his hands under her startled eyes. Selma Richie drew in her breath sharply at the sight. John's palms were stripped of skin, a mass of raw, quivering flesh. She knew the agony it meant.

'Satisfied? You ought to be! Judas!'

Evelyn's voice was almost a whisper. 'Oh, John! I didn't!'

'Liar, too!' John spoke wearily. 'Aren't you proud! Does this please you? I was to be punished! Laugh! The victory is yours. You said you would and you did!'

Apparently both had forgotten the others. Selma Richie stole a glance at Mortimer's face. It was lowering, but he was still smiling faintly. Only his eyes were cold and implacable. She read his motive even as she looked and some impulse urged her to cry out a warning to John, but she could not.

Again Evelyn spoke in a strained whisper. 'I — I didn't know, John. Truly I didn't. I — I was never told. You'll believe that, John!'

Ogletree laughed thickly. 'Believe you! I'm paying now for believing you. But I was warned. I hope you're satisfied.'

'I didn't know, John.' This seemed Evelyn Mortimer's sole thought. 'I didn't know ——'

Mortimer's cold voice cut through her words, silencing her. 'Is this the sort of discipline you maintain, Keller?' he

asked curtly. 'Since when have convicts spoken to visitors without permission?'

Keller lifted the whistle at his neck and blew a sharp blast. 'I shall see that it does not happen again, sir,' he said easily. He was not deceived by Mortimer's rebuke; events had been as Mortimer wished.

When the guards came he pointed to John. 'Take this man to his cell. I shall attend to him later.'

John looked back over his shoulder as he was led away. His eyes sought Evelyn Mortimer who looked after him, an agony of regret in her face.

'Damn you!' said John. 'That's what I hope. Damn you! I hope you'll suffer as you have made me suffer.'

He was gone with that. Evelyn stood with bowed head. Mortimer looked at her sardonically. Keller, at a glance from the master of Alamosa, effaced himself. To Selma Mortimer spoke crisply.

'We will excuse you until some other time. I wish to speak to my wife.'

Selma was not awed. 'Mrs. Mortimer is still my patient,' she said. 'I am not sure that it is wise for me to leave her.'

Mortimer eyed her. 'I am,' he said dryly. 'It will be much wiser. Leave us.'

Selma moved away reluctantly and then forgot Evelyn in her memory of John Ogletree. Marred by the toil underground, scored by the bitterness of his thoughts, he had come out well-nigh a wreck. But his spirit had not been broken, she reflected, or he would not have braved Mortimer to speak to Evelyn.

Behind her Evelyn stood with downcast head for a moment. Then she lifted her chin and met her husband's eyes squarely. Calmness seemed to have descended upon her; there was no fear in her manner. She was self-possessed — reflective even.

'You meant this to happen,' she said. It was not an accusation, merely a statement of fact.

'I did,' her husband answered suavely. 'I think that it is time that we understood each other.'

'Surely not here!' Evelyn gestured about her at the watching guards.

'We will go home,' said Mortimer gravely.

Mortimer's hand on her arm, they passed out the stockade gates followed by glances of discreet curiosity. The guards sensed something unusual, although none had been close enough to hear John's words. Evelyn walked with her eyes on the ground, her thoughts busy.

So they came to their home. There Evelyn ensconced herself in the cushioned swing and Mortimer seated himself opposite her. To him she lifted calm eyes.

'You may explain now.'

'The explanation is due from you to me,' Mortimer answered.

'You returned Ogletree to the mines?' She spoke his name without a tremor.

'I did.'

'Without troubling to mention it to me?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

Before he answered, Mortimer drew a cigar from his pocket and lit it with meticulous care. His eyes were hard when the flare of the match revealed them for a moment. He pinched out the flame thoughtfully and tossed the stick over the railing.

'I suggest that you think for a moment and the answer should occur to you.'

'Did you return him because of me?' Evelyn would have no indirection.

'That was one of the reasons.'

'And the others?'

'I resent being deceived by those I trust.'

'And when you are?'

'Some one suffers.' He made the statement simply, without heat and without rancor.

'I am to suffer?'

Mortimer smiled at that, a cold smile that showed gleaming teeth in the swarthy face. 'No. Ogletree.'

'I see.' Evelyn's face grew reflective. 'Then this afternoon was stage-managed, was it?'

'You mean that I arranged for it to happen?'

'Yes.'

'Quite true. I meant for him to see you and for you to see him.'

'Why?'

'I wished to know what would happen.'

'And were you satisfied?'

'My ideas were confirmed.'

'And what were your ideas?'

Mortimer shifted in his chair and knocked the ashes from his cigar with a careful finger. 'When I first saw that everything was not as it should be, I went to Birmingham. There I discovered by means of my own that Ogletree had once been a part of your life. That was before I met you. I was then curious to see how he should have been sent to Alamosa — to me and to you. So I went to Montgomery. Garlock and I are good friends; we serve each other. I found means to loosen his tongue. I discovered what I wanted.' With the words he looked at her intently. 'Am I correct?'

'Certainly.'

Mortimer spread his hands. 'Then it is hardly likely that I should retain Ogletree. As I do not choose to punish you, he will be the one to suffer.'

Evelyn nodded confirmation of the thought. 'Suppose the

blame was not his, but mine. He had no choice but to come here when he was ordered. I was responsible for that as you discovered.'

'But afterward, my dear! Afterward!'

Mortimer revealed his feeling for an instant and Evelyn saw what she had guessed — that his calmness was assumed.

'Now what do you propose to do?'

'Nothing. I shall leave that to Keller — ah, Blood Keller the men call him, I believe.'

Evelyn considered her husband with cold eyes. 'Paul, you must remove Ogletree from the mine,' she said.

'You have a reason for the request, of course.' His irony was sharp.

'Certainly. He cannot endure life underground. You must send him back to Madison.'

'As to that I have my own ideas.'

Again her eyes traveled over him. 'Paul, I have never been under the illusion that you cared for me very much. I was and am a sort of vanity with you. It pleases you to own me. I do not think you want me to hate you. You must send Ogletree back to Madison.'

'You will hate me if I do not?'

'I am not a woman to hate lightly, Paul. Hate does not come easily to me. I do not want to hate you, Paul. I — I fear myself.'

It was Mortimer's turn to scan her face closely. 'This is deeper than I thought,' he said coolly. 'You are very insistent in your demands for him.'

'Because he is blameless. If you must punish some one, punish me. I — I tempted him.'

Mortimer's face grew black. 'Be silent! You try my patience beyond endurance. Don't you know that every prayer you make but urges his condemnation? You could have but one reason for all this. You care for him.'

Evelyn's face paled. Slowly she rose to her feet. 'I do!' she said simply. 'Now what?'

Mortimer's tone was still suave. 'You love him?'

'Yes.'

He laughed and Evelyn flushed indignantly and then whitened in quiet fury. She waited until he had finished.

'You find it amusing?'

'Yes. The idea has its humor. Competing with a convict for the love of my own wife! Cannot you see how amusing it is? I laugh at the irony of it.' He laughed again but his mirth ended with a snarl. 'Send Ogletree to Madison! Not much! I want him here. There is something between us to be settled.'

With that he calmed; the purple died out of his face; he settled himself in his chair and relighted his cigar with steady fingers. Evelyn gazed at him a moment and then sat down in the swing.

'Let us understand each other, Paul. You will not send Ogletree back to Madison?'

'I will not.'

'That involves consequences.'

'For him? Yes.'

'No. For you.'

'Ah, threats. Well, let's hear them.'

'There are no threats. I know you too well for that. Do you care more for your . . . for satisfying your anger against Ogletree than you do for me — or rather for continuing your ownership of me?'

'I shall not lose you by punishing Ogletree.'

'That is what I am trying to tell you, Paul. You will. I cannot remain in Alamosa, with you, while you do this thing. Even granted that you have justification — which you haven't — it would be impossible. I want you to weigh what is involved before you do anything irrevocable. I

think I have become a sort of habit with you. You would miss me. I don't want to go, Paul. I have done nothing to make it necessary. I — I said that I loved him, but I — I — it's not what you think I mean. It is like this, Paul. We knew each other years ago. I thought dead ashes had been rekindled, but I was wrong. It was an impossible task. You left a void in my life: he — he filled it for the time being.' Desperately she was playing her cards to win him. She was desperately afraid for Ogletree, for she knew her husband. But her appeal left Mortimer unmoved.

'You said that you loved him,' Mortimer said calmly. 'Now you are recanting. I don't think you loved him either. You never loved any one but yourself and you never will, but I shall teach you that you must remain on the reservation even for your play. I permit no diversions for my wife but myself.'

'You want to lose me, Paul? I say this deliberately. I've thought about it because I feared this was coming. You heard what he said this afternoon. He thinks I sent him to the mine because — because, well, he thinks I did. I won't have that, Paul. He's right in a way, but I didn't mean to do it and I am determined to undo it. Send him back to Madison, Paul.'

There was allure in her tones. Plainly she offered herself to him as a bribe. Her blandishment fell on deaf ears, for Mortimer's reply was instant:

'I shall not.'

Evelyn rose to her full height. 'Then remember this, Paul. I shall leave you — immediately. I shall go to Birmingham. I am not without friends. I know Governor Ashmead. I know Mr. Garlock. I shall ——'

Mortimer's voice was icy. He leaned forward and thrust her back to her seat.

'You will do nothing of the kind. You will not leave me nor Alamosa.'

'How will you prevent it?' Her crest reared for a moment.

'I shall use physical force if necessary,' he answered suavely. 'Who is there in Alamosa to restrain me? Be warned in time and do not push me too far.'

His eyes burned into hers; one hand gripped her arm savagely. She shrank away at the ferocity of his face.

'But — but why should you wish to keep me when I do not wish to remain?'

Mortimer's reserve broke with that and his dark face worked. He spoke with savage menace.

'I'm going to break your lover and you're going to be here to see. That's why!'

CHAPTER XVII

THE next morning when John dragged himself from his cot in answer to the rising bell, he could scarcely stand erect. Every muscle in his body ached and even a single step brought sharp protest from nerves that had not rested during a sleepless night.

His hands were puffed and swollen and he could not close his fingers. The attempt to dress was a torture. From the next bunk Skip Collier looked at him evilly.

'You're gonna git yore shore 'nuff trial to-day,' he said. 'First day sometimes ain't so hard, but the second 'll git you shore.'

John did not answer. He tried to button his coarse shirt with clumsy fingers. He managed to worry on his shoes. Seeing his plight the other convicts had relieved him of the work with the broom. Even then he was not dressed when the marching gong rang. Ames stopped beside him.

'Here, son. This ain't goin' to do. Lemme help you.'

His fingers worked swiftly and John stumbled after him in the wake of the men as they marched into the dining-room. Somehow he held his mess kit and received his portion of food. The sight of it sickened him: fat bacon swimming in grease, cornbread, and molasses. He left it untouched, but drank his coffee scalding hot.

He whispered to Ames. 'Can't I get something for my hands?'

Watching his opportunity Ames whispered back, cloaking his speech behind a fellow convict's body. 'Show 'em to the guard. Ask him to take you to Doctor David.'

At the rising gong, John approached the guard. 'Can I

get something for my hands?' he asked, spreading then out for the man's inspection. They were swollen to twice their normal size. The guard squinted at them.

'Your first day, eh? All right. I'll put you on sick report and you can come over to the hospital.'

As they were going out the door they met Keller. His pale eyes went from John to the guard.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'His hands is in pretty bad shape. I was takin' him over to Dr. Richie,' the guard explained.

'Let me see,' Keller said sympathetically.

John stretched out his hands obediently. Keller bent over them and murmured commiseratingly. 'That's too bad. And your first day inside, too.' He ran his fingers over the raw places in John's palm and John clenched his teeth at the pain. 'I'll tell you, Ogletree, the best way for you to do is just go right ahead and work. Your hands will toughen. I know how it is, and the only way to get used to the mine is to stick it out. Now you do that and the first thing you know you won't have any trouble with your hands.'

His musical tones were bland and sympathetic. John stared at him puzzled, not grasping the full sense of his words.

'You mean I ain't to take him to the hospital?' asked the guard.

'No.' Keller was regretful. 'Dr. Richie is a busy man and really hasn't time to be troubled with little things like this. Just go on in the mine, Ogletree, and you'll get used to it.'

For a moment John was unbelieving. Keller was so sympathetic. John, forgetting, made another appeal.

'But I can't handle a pick with them like this, Mr. Keller. I can't even close my ——'

Again Keller shook his head. 'Try it. They will limber

up. When anything serious is wrong now, just let me know and I'll fix you up. But this isn't bad enough for Dr. Richie.'

'Come on,' said the guard. Long familiarity with Keller had made him callous to such as this. 'Come on. Into the washroom with you. Didn't you hear what the Cap'n said?'

John stumbled away to his place in line and accepted the dinner bucket handed him. Even yet he did not have a full appreciation of Keller's tigerish cruelty hidden under the demeanor of seeming sympathy.

The warden looked after John and for an instant his eyes were veiled. He had not forgotten the scene of the night before. He had not heard from Mortimer, but surely the master of Alamosa did not propose to let such a thing pass unrebuked. Until then . . .

Ames had not been able to wait for him in the washroom and John was forced to change his clothing alone. It was agonizing work, but his brain cleared under the pain. He clenched his teeth and forced his fingers to do his will.

He was dressed at last and followed the men who had preceded him down the manway for the two-mile walk to his entry. He did not know how he was to survive the day. His hands felt as if they would burst. He stumbled along, arms dangling; he had not yet learned to clasp his fingers behind his back to ease the strain on his shoulders.

John had no clear recollection of how he reached his entry. He knew that once he fell and fought against the impulse to remain outstretched in the darkness. He was aroused by a lamp being thrust into his face and Collier's snarling voice.

'Where in hell have you been?' the check-runner demanded. 'You're more'n a half-hour late. Don't you know you gotta make that up?'

John turned a deaf ear to his abuse. What use to try to explain? He went to his room where an empty car waited

for its load. Beside the huge mound of coal brought down by the powder gang was his pick and shovel.

By a tremendous effort he cleared his head and took up the shovel. It was agony to touch the handle and he could hardly lift it. His courage was near the breaking point, but he persisted mechanically. Others had gone through this and he must also. Slowly the car filled. It required hours. Occasionally Skip Collier came back and regarded him sardonically. Once he spoke.

'You're gonna wind up in the doghouse,' he threatened. 'You ain't gonta load no three cars at this rate.'

'I'm doing the best I can,' John said dully. 'Look at my hands.'

'I don't want to see yore hands. Up top they said you was able to load six tons a day an' it's my job to see you do it. Now you get busy or I'll see if I can't persuade you a little with this tickler.' Collier twirled the pick handle he carried suggestively and John again bent to labor.

John worked drunkenly. Sometimes, blinded by his pain, he spilled the coal that he lifted. He tried loading with his hands but this was worse than the shovel. He moved automatically.

He cursed Evelyn Mortimer under his breath. She was responsible for this! She had condemned him to this! He had feared the mine, but he had not known. If he had, perhaps he would. . . . He remembered her as she had looked the night before. Dainty and cool and clean and heartless. In his fevered mind it seemed now that she had laughed at him.

And Mortimer, what of him? New fear shook him. Mortimer must know now. And yet he had done nothing. John began to whimper to himself. He was scarcely human; a sodden thing that bore hardly a semblance to a man. He worked mechanically, slipping and sobbing and cursing — all things forgotten except his fear.

On the surface Mortimer was moving deliberately. He had not been hurried into precipitate action by his wife's outburst nor the confirmation of his suspicions. He did not lose his head in his rage and crush John Ogletree with a single move as he might have done.

He was too rancorous for that. He wanted Evelyn to know and he wanted Ogletree to know. Consequently he waited hours until his passion had cooled and he could think. Then he summoned Keller to his office late in the afternoon. He waited that long for his purpose to take definite shape in his mind.

Keller came in, immaculate, scented, meticulously barbered and if he was curious he concealed it.

'I called you about this man Ogletree,' Mortimer said smoothly. 'Doubtless you were surprised yesterday afternoon.'

There were times when Keller was voluble and others when he kept silent. Now he spoke sparingly. 'Yes, sir.'

'He is in the mine?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Mining is a hazardous profession.'

'Very hazardous, sir.'

'It is doubly so for the inexperienced man.'

'That is quite true.'

'I particularly do not wish this man Ogletree to be favored further. He must take the same risks the others do in the mine.'

'I see, sir.'

'It would be regrettable if anything should happen to him — just yet.'

'I quite understand.'

'Do you? I said — just yet. Mark that — just yet.'

'And in the meantime, sir?'

'I leave disciplinary measures with you. It is not my in-

tention that Ogletree should escape any just punishment.'

The two men stared at each other steadily. Keller understood perfectly that the sentence of death by torture had been imposed on Ogletree. He had no particular animus toward the convict but at the thought of what was to come his face lit up for a moment with unbridled ferocity.

'Is there anything further?' Mortimer asked.

Keller raised his brows. 'Why — why, you haven't quite covered the situation, have you, sir?'

Mortimer grunted at that. 'You'll get a bonus, if that is what you mean. I want you to have a free hand with this man. It should not be necessary to go into details with you. It has not been in the past. On second thought there will be no bonus for you. You will do this because of regard for me. Later on —'

Keller veiled his eyes. 'Very well, sir. I'll start in the morning. I judge that you want me to sort of work up.'

Mortimer nodded. 'I'll leave that entirely with you. But I wish to be informed.'

'My tippie reports to-day showed Ogletree short two tons and no under-cutting. I think I'll rather convey to him in the morning that he is expected to conform to prison regulations.'

'Do so. And consult with me about any other punishments. There must not be anything sudden about this, Keller.'

Keller summoned John Ogletree the next morning while he was still in the mess-hall. By now John was in a terrible state. His hands were worse than they had been the day before and all Ames's efforts to bring him relief had been in vain.

In Keller's office he again faced the bland sympathy of the warden. 'You're new to the mine, Ogletree. We always make it a point to see that new men learn our ways. It's

kinder in the end. Until you know the penalty for failure to get your tasks you cannot appreciate the necessity for doing your work. Therefore, I'm really doing you a favor in teaching you this quickly.' He lifted gentle eyes to the guard. 'Four hours in the doghouse.'

John followed the guard apathetically. The man led the way to the basement of the main prison, down some dark steps and opened a closet in one corner of the building.

'Get in there,' he ordered.

John stepped into the cubby hole. There was not room enough for him to turn around.

'Raise your arms,' the guard commanded.

John raised his arms and felt the guard place his wrists in handcuffs; then the click of a turning key and his hands were held securely above his head. The guard spoke under his breath.

'I'm supposed to pull you up so you hang by your wrists, but I guess I won't. Your hands are in pretty bad shape.'

He closed the door and locked it, turned out the light, and departed. John listened to his retreating footsteps without realization of the ordeal before him. For a few moments he was not uncomfortable. Above his head the blood drained from his hands and the throbbing was eased a little. He tried to move but found that his cell was so small that he could not turn.

Breathing became difficult. John began to understand the horrors of the doghouse. He could not change his position in any way. The pain grew fiercer. Four hours of this! Despair swept him.

The minutes dragged. John was half-conscious. His legs had given away and now he was virtually suspended by his wrists, despite the unexpected kindness of the guard. His arms felt as if they would be pulled from their sockets.

The darkness oppressed him. The throbbing in his hands

began again. He was one mass of pain. Behind his neck the muscles cramped. His head fell forward and he hung from his hands scarcely breathing.

John lost all track of time. . . . The pain grew unbearable. Once he thought he screamed . . . but enclosed in the narrow space he knew that his voice could never penetrate the walls. . . . It could not grow worse. . . . Then miraculously it began to grow easier. He was numb . . . the pain was not so intense.

He was past caring what happened when the door opened and the guard who had shackled him came back. John did not have strength to lift his head. When his wrists were unloosed he would have slumped to the floor had the guard not supported him.

The man led him up the stairs and out into the open air. John was hardly conscious. In the yard John knew that Keller suddenly stood before them. The warden was smiling.

'That is the penalty for failure — the first time,' he said. 'Now you can understand the necessity of doing your work.' John did not answer. The guard still held him and Keller frowned.

'Stand him on his feet,' he ordered.

Obediently the guard stepped back but John's legs buckled under him and he fell in a heap at Keller's feet, nor did he move when the warden stirred him with his toe and ordered:

'Get up and go to your bunk.'

John's face was dead white, eyes closed, mouth opened, breathing faintly. Keller looked about him and motioned to two guards.

'Dump him on his bunk,' he directed. The men were lifting John when there was an interruption. Dr. Richie, passing through the yard, saw the group and saw John fall. Now he came to his side.

‘Wait a minute,’ he said. He examined John swiftly. ‘This man should be in the hospital. Take him there.’

Keller did not countermand the order. He merely smiled at the thought of the future.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOHN OGLETREE's face darkened when Selma Ritchie came quietly into the bare little room in the prison hospital where he lay on a cot near the window that gave a view of the cheerless exterior of the stockade.

She busied herself at a table that bore a lotion for his hands, bandages, a disinfectant, and a glass. He gazed at her somberly and did not speak, nor did she.

Leaving the table she went to the window and drew down the shade to shut out the merciless glare from the sun. John's eyes followed her white-clad figure, trim and neat in the nurse's uniform, her hair tucked neatly under a cap that accentuated the blue of her eyes under the dark brows.

Her face was absent as she performed the small tasks about the room, emptied the glass and refilled it, wound up the bandages and straightened the covers about him. Finished at last, she paused at the foot of the cot and met his eyes squarely.

John's lips drew into a sneer. 'Well, why don't you say it?' he asked sullenly.

'What?' she asked calmly.

'That the thing you predicted has happened. That it is all my fault.'

'Since you seem to realize it, there is no necessity for my reminding you.'

John lifted a hand and brushed it across his face. Though he had been three days in the hospital his fingers were swathed in bandages against the blood poison that had threatened. His arms were stiff and sore, but pain had passed.

He was reckless in his bitterness and despair. His plight

could be no worse, he told himself, and in the freedom from fear that this thought gave him his tone was savage.

'You have come to point the moral, I suppose. Be good and you'll be happy. That was what you told me, I believe. I am listening.'

'That is all very true,' Selma agreed. 'Have you any other thoughts along the same line?'

'Plenty of them,' he said bitterly.

'Say them, then, and when you have finished I have something to tell you.'

John laughed harshly. 'Nothing pleasant or you would not be so evidently enjoying the anticipation of telling me.'

His face was scowling and his eyes were dancing points of light. Selma looked at him appraisingly, seeming struck by some new note in his manner. But her words were quiet and she studiously refrained from anger.

'I have a message for you,' she said.

John struggled up on one elbow, heedless of the pain that movement brought to his hands. 'A message! From Mortimer, I suppose.' He laughed again and his mirth was ugly. 'I need no messages from him. I know what to expect.'

'It is not from Mortimer, it is from Evelyn.'

John threw himself back on his pillow and gestured fiercely with his bandaged hands. 'I suppose she's sorry.'

'Yes. That was part of what I was to tell you.'

'Sorry! She sent me to this and now she says she is sorry!' John spread his hands before him and looked at the bandaged fingers. His eyes narrowed as he looked up at Selma. 'She would say that. Well I want none of her sorrow. Let her keep it for herself. I don't want to hear any message from her.'

Selma moved impatiently at this and her voice sharpened. 'If you are going to speak like that, very well. You needn't

hear it unless you wish, but I think you should know what she said.'

'Very well,' John agreed sulkily.

'Evelyn is really sorry. No, wait —' as John opened his lips — 'she really is and she is not as much to blame as you think. She was not responsible for your transfer to the mine.'

'The hell she isn't!' John was not troubling to choose his words.

'No. Mortimer did that. I tell you I know sincerity when I see it. Besides, Mortimer told my father that he had ordered your transfer.'

'Did he tell you why?'

'No. But I know why and so do you. Mortimer found that Evelyn had you sent here and this is his way of removing you from contact with her. I told you he was not stupid.'

'Ah, now we have it,' he said ironically. 'I told you so. You did. I admit it. What then?'

Selma frowned again. 'We are wasting time. I have a message for you from Evelyn. Do you want to hear it? If not I shall not trouble you.'

'I beg your pardon.' There was a note of apology in his voice. 'You are trying to do me a service. But you see, this is so unusual for you that I must be forgiven for not recognizing it. What is Evelyn's message?'

Selma listened for a moment before replying. The hospital was quiet save for an occasional distant footfall. Outside there was the shrill of Keller's whistle and voices subdued by the distance. Once a gong rang.

'You wish to hear it all?'

John nodded without speaking. He bit his lip, smoothed the frown from his face. Evelyn now could neither harm nor help him; he was forever beyond her reach.

Selma drew out a chair and sat down. She spoke quietly,

with her eyes steadily on his face, as if to gauge the effect of her words.

'Evelyn came to the house yesterday to see me,' she said. 'She offers you a way out.'

'A way out!' John echoed the words vacantly.

'Yes.'

'But — but Mortimer?'

Selma nodded coolly. 'That can be managed. Money can do things even in Alamosa and Evelyn will supply that.'

John's face grew bleak and his lips lost their color, but he merely nodded.

'I see. Well, what does she propose?'

'This. She told me to tell you that she is helpless to do anything openly, but that she has no idea of evading her responsibility. She warned me that it is vital that you be gotten away from Alamosa.'

'Ah, as if that were so easy!'

'Money unlocks prison doors and she knows it. It is her way of salvation for you and she feels that it is a matter of life and death. She is afraid of her husband and what he will do. She is afraid — and I think her fear is quite justified. Mortimer is not a man to stick at trifles and you know his provocation.'

'He has none.'

'I'll not argue that with you, but he thinks he has and the result is the same.'

Selma drew from her pocket a fat roll of bills and proffered them to him.

'I have five hundred dollars here. You should be able to blind the men in the guardhouse on the slope with that.'

'And then?'

She was watching John closely but his face was inscrutable.

'You know the cave behind the Rock House? She said that you two had explored it. Once away from the mine go

there and you will find clothing and food which she will place there herself.'

'And then?'

Selma's brows went up at that. 'Then you leave as quickly as you can. Go somewhere and start over. Get away. That is the first thing to be considered.'

John opened his eyes at that and Selma was a little startled at what they showed. He spoke thickly.

'I'll die before I touch her money! She did this to me and now she gives me five hundred dollars and calmly casts me off. Go somewhere else and start over again! Nice of her. Well, I won't do it. I'll not touch her money. I won't take her help. Tell her so and tell her that I cursed her when I said it.'

He spoke passionately, but there was no answering heat in Selma's voice. 'All very heroic!' she observed dryly. 'High-minded and all that sort of thing, but have you thought of what you will face when you return to the mine?'

'Yes.'

'And you are willing to face it?'

'What choice have I?' He shrugged helplessly. 'Oh, hell! What's the use. She isn't really giving me an opportunity to get out. She's merely proposing to put me in hell for the rest of my life. Well, I won't do it. I'm through with her — finished. I'll work it out myself.'

'But don't you realize that you will not be permitted to do that! Do you suppose that Mortimer will be satisfied to ignore you? Do you realize what it means when Keller is given a free hand?'

'I can imagine.'

'You're going back to that?'

'I am. There's nothing else to do. I can't depend on Evelyn.' He was a little calmer now. 'Besides, to do what she wishes would mean that I'd be a fugitive for the rest of

my life. I'd never know a moment's peace and I couldn't build anything permanent. Life like that doesn't appeal to me. I've had time to think a lot while I've been here. I know you haven't a very high opinion of me, but I can face an issue when there's no other alternative and I've faced this. I say this calmly. I shall take my chances here in the prison and Evelyn may keep her money and keep her help. I don't want them and I won't take them. The price is too high.'

Selma looked at him thoughtfully. 'Not even if Evelyn also bade me say that she would come to you when you made it possible? Suppose she had said that? What would you do then?'

Her eyes were searching his face. In her lap one hand closed tightly about the slender roll of bills, but outwardly her calm was unmoved.

John looked at her and laughed jeeringly.

'Evelyn Mortimer said that! Oh, no. I quit believing fairy stories a long time ago.'

'But suppose she had said it?' Selma persisted calmly.

'I don't build the foundation of any future I may have on sand,' he answered soberly. 'I've tried not to be more bitter than I could help and yet — it is only natural that I — I should blame her for this.' He broke off suddenly. 'Hasn't she done enough to me?' he cried. 'Tell her, no! But she did not say it.'

'No,' Selma agreed. 'She didn't.'

'Then why did you ask ——'

'I was curious, that's all.' Selma's tone discouraged further demands for explanation.

'You wanted to see if I was cured, didn't you?'

'Well — yes.'

He smiled mirthlessly. 'I am,' he said and the simple words were eloquent.

He turned his face away and gazed out the window. It

was like Evelyn Mortimer to offer him money. As if there could be any compensation for what she had done. He saw the dreary prospect absently. And then curiously his thoughts shifted to Selma Richie. Why had she troubled to come to him? Did he imagine it, or was her manner softening? Then he remembered Gideon Ames's words. 'Wait 'til you git in trouble, son, an' then you'll git real 'quainted with Mis' Selma.'

He was in trouble now, but he shook his head impatiently and the vision passed. Grimly he resolved to live each day only; there was no future and little past. He was roused from his reverie by Selma's voice.

'Since you won't take the only way out, what do you plan?'

'Plan?' He stretched out his bandaged hands and looked at them. 'Plan? Why, I'm going to learn how to be the best convict miner in the State of Alabama.' He smiled ironically. 'That will be something.'

Selma rose as if to indicate that she had finished, but at the door she paused and came back. Her eyes were very direct; John found himself held by the clarity of her gaze: it was almost hypnotic.

'You wouldn't accept help from Evelyn Mortimer,' she said. 'Do you feel that way about others?'

'There are no others,' said John roughly. 'Except perhaps Gideon Ames, and he has troubles of his own. You know about him.'

'Are you quite sure there is no one?'

'What do you mean? I haven't been overwhelmed with kindness since I've been at Alamosa. I think of no one else.'

'I might find it possible to help you. My father and I in the past have been able to help others.'

John was bewildered at that. 'But — but, I don't understand. Always you — you have seemed to think that I

wasn't worth helping.' His throat filled up at that and his bitterness was suddenly softened. 'If you think it worth while, I — I would be ungrateful to refuse.'

Selma paused at the door. 'Do not rely too much upon that,' she said. 'Mortimer rules Alamosa. But perhaps there ——'

Again she came back into the room. John wondered at her lingering. She seemed almost hesitant; again there was that luminous glance that held his own. Her face was very grave. Over the foot of the cot she leaned toward him.

'How much courage have you?' she demanded unexpectedly.

'Why — why, I don't know,' John answered. Then his face sobered. 'Not much, I'm afraid. Why do you ask?'

'Because you will need all that you have and more,' she answered and left him to wonder.

CHAPTER XIX

ON the table before him Paul Mortimer's great fingers stretched and worked. His black eyes narrowed to slits that burned in the white mask of his face, ordinarily swarthy but now drained of all color.

His thoughts were of John Ogletree and for the moment they had slipped the leash. He felt the yielding flesh of Ogletree under the tremendous pressure of his fingers and his lips twisted. He dallied with the idea and its essence was a drug to his senses. . . .

He felt the breath laboring in the throat under his fingers; he could hear the sobbing gasps for air; he could feel the drumming pulse of an overtaxed heart. There was a struggle . . . His fingers tightened resistlessly . . . one bubbling gasp . . .

And then . . . the body grew limp in his hands. He raised it and gazed at the face convulsed in the awful struggle for breath; at the blue lips and bursting eyes. The distorted features were those of . . . John Ogletree. For a moment he sated himself, then flung the body from him. . . .

Mortimer opened his eyes, his arms relaxed, and he exhaled with a great sigh. Evelyn Mortimer looked up at the sound and shrank a little at the grimness of her husband's face. Mortimer was again buried in thought and his reflections were mirrored in his look.

It would be good to see Ogletree die like that, knowing whose hand cast him into eternity; that would be a fit end, but there were better ways to punish him.

Mortimer was determined on murder — nothing less. He intended that John Ogletree should die, but he did not propose that his death should be easy. Much more than that

was to be done before there should be another bare wooden cross in the bleak prison cemetery on the banks of the Warrior.

There was Evelyn to consider. Mortimer had not forgotten for an instant that she had had a part with Ogletree in the deceit practiced upon him, nor was it part of his plan that she should escape punishment. He looked over at her on the thought and smiled heavily.

Evelyn's face bore mute testimony to the fact that already Mortimer had begun to exact a terrible penalty for her contact with Ogletree. Her violet eyes were darkly circled and there was a dazed look about her face as of one come newly to confront an overwhelming catastrophe.

Mortimer was satisfied. He had not crushed her yet, but he would. He had just begun the calculated cruelty by which he intended to humble her spirit. Mortimer was determined on one thing — she would come groveling to his feet, broken and begging for mercy. The question of mastery for once and for all should be settled. And then, when he had put his mark on her, he would keep her or cast her off as the mood suited him.

Mortimer had been stunned by Evelyn's confession that she loved John Ogletree; he felt as if the very foundations of his life had been swept aside. Instead of building on a rock, he had built on sand that shifted and changed with the first hot wind. He was not a man to sit idle and see that happen.

He considered a moment and was savagely elate at the sense of his power. Keller was his — bought body and soul. The guards? The tippie boss? The inside mine crew? The fire boss? The inspectors? His! All his! Paid by his money and knowing it. They looked to him and not to the State that had at best but a feeble interest in the wretched convicts that it had sold.

Who was there in Alamosa to say him nay? No one. He

exulted in the thought. Over the stockade he ruled with the power of fear and of money and the men inside it belonged to him.

What if whispers did reach the Capitol at Montgomery? Garlock was his friend — another beneficiary of his bounty. And there were others even higher than Garlock who lent a willing ear to any whisper of his.

Ogletree must not die quickly, for Evelyn must be punished as well. Her torture was to be the more exquisite. Ogletree's sufferings were to be physical, but Mortimer gauged his wife with diabolic cleverness — she must be crushed through regard for Ogletree.

She was brave enough; he could not break her through fear for herself, but he doubted if her courage was proof against the sight of Ogletree as he meant for her to see him. Ogletree should live until he had served Mortimer's purpose with Evelyn. And then . . .

The mine room was lighted only by the flicker of a carbide lamp; close against the working face of the coal a man labored on his knees, swinging a pick. The roof was low and there was the subdued murmur of water. Suddenly the roof cracked. The man struggled wildly to get to his feet. The rock! He had protested against the timbering! In the breath that he rose from his knees, there was a soft ripping sound and the roof seemed to collapse. There was a scream, strangled before it was half uttered, and silence . . .

Mortimer lifted a hand to his eyes and the vision cleared. Ogletree should die when he willed it. That was easy enough. Keller had not won his ghastly soubriquet for nothing. It remained first to deal with Evelyn.

She sat under the shaded lamp, her chin on her hand and her eyes vacant. Her face was wan and on the delicate neck the scar of a jagged cut still showed red and angry. But it had healed and she had regained her strength. She went

about it deliberately. She would have need of strength in the future.

For the first time in her life Evelyn Mortimer knew what it was to be afraid. She was afraid of her husband — not for herself, but for Ogletree. She did not attempt to deceive herself now. She loved Ogletree — loved him hopelessly, knew that the love could mean nothing but heartbreak and disaster for them both — but still it persisted.

The sheath of selfishness that had enveloped her nature had been stripped from her by the flame that burned within her. She no longer counted the cost to herself, but measured consequences only in effect upon Ogletree.

It was because of this that she had attempted to placate her husband; striving in vain to win him from his bodeful silence by feminine blandishment and allure to which he had never before been insensible. She was willing to sacrifice herself to Paul Mortimer if she could win safety for John Ogletree. She cared that much — yet, as the days passed, hopelessness grew. Against the granite silence of her husband she broke herself in vain. She could not win from him a single gleam of softness.

There was a fearful menace in his quiet. Evelyn knew from Selma Richie that John was still in the hospital and through her she had made her last desperate play for his safety. Once let him get safely away what happened to her mattered little.

But that hope was ended, too. Softened a little by Selma, John's blunt words had come back to her. She came very close to despair with that. If only he would believe! But she put the thought away from her. What he thought of her did not matter. She loved him. He stood in terrible danger. There would be time for explanations afterward when he was in safety.

But she was able to do nothing. The days passed somehow

... the hours lagged ... Each afternoon she looked up fearfully when her husband entered the house ... What did he have to tell her? Her nerves came closer to snapping point each afternoon as he took his seat at the dinner table and ate without a word.

And after dinner ... She shuddered. One night she had started up the stairs when Mortimer halted her.

'Where are you going?'

'To bed,' she replied wearily. 'I do not feel equal to sitting up.'

'You go up too early. Come back and sit in the living-room with me.' He laughed. 'I grow tired alone.'

Evelyn lifted a hand to her head. 'Don't, Paul. Why do you wish me to sit with you if you never open your lips?'

Mortimer moved a step nearer and his voice sank to a purring note.

'It is not necessary that I should give you any explanation for what I do. Come into the living-room.'

After one look at his face Evelyn had obeyed. She was fearful lest she anger him needlessly.

Her head ached and she was haunted by her thoughts. It seemed intolerable that John should think that she had betrayed him.

Across from her Mortimer sat and smoked in silence. Occasionally she caught his eyes on her and shivered. They were cold; appraising her mercilessly.

At last Evelyn spoke and her tone was meek, 'I — I am tired, Paul. May I go up now?'

But Mortimer would not have it so. He wanted an outward evidence of his power and capriciously demanded that she remain fifteen minutes.

Evelyn's days became a series of petty tyrannies. Every moment she felt the weight of his displeasure. She hardly dared leave the house. It was not that Mortimer threatened

or spoke angrily; it was the feeling that displeasure with her he would visit on Ogletree.

And then she made her final appeal to him; hoping desperately that word of hers might move him. She did not spare herself humiliation. Her proudness she bent unreservedly before him and unconsciously stored up the memory against him. But now she had no thought of that; no sacrifice of pride was too great if she could gain her purpose. She spoke meekly but even so her beginning was unfortunate and Mortimer's face darkened. She began without preamble.

'Paul, I — I have decided not to leave Alamosa.'

Mortimer turned his huge head and looked at her for a moment before he answered. The force of his gaze was like a blow and Evelyn's finger-tips grew cold. Two small spots of color appeared in her white cheeks, but her eyes did not waver.

'You are wise,' her husband answered.

'I — I have decided to stay here.'

'It is just as well that you have realized your position, but do not expect me to believe that you made the choice voluntarily. I meant just what I said when I told you that I would have stopped you by physical means if you had tried to leave.'

'Still, it was not that reason that kept me.'

'You are asking me to believe, I suppose, that you remained out of regard for me.'

'No-o, not that either, Paul. I was afraid for you and afraid for myself if I had gone. I — I don't want anything done that can't be undone for either of us, Paul. Isn't there any hope of your understanding?'

'That's the trouble now. I understand too well.'

The conversation was not going as she had intended; Evelyn felt helpless, caught in the meshes of a will that was stronger than hers.

‘But you don’t, Paul. How many times have I ——’

Mortimer interrupted with a hard laugh. ‘Yes, and you lied then just as you did before. Now I understand perfectly. I gave you everything that money could buy. I held out a future before you that was beyond anything you had ever expected; I gave you my name. I served you. And what return did you make? You couldn’t even have the common virtue of loyalty to the hand that fed you.’

‘Paul!’

‘Your choice was no compliment to me. You preferred a convict, a thief, a convicted embezzler to me. If you wanted him why didn’t you take him when you had the chance? But no. You needn’t answer that. I don’t care. It is enough to know that you didn’t.’

‘I’m asking mercy, Paul. Only mercy — not justice.’

‘Ask it and see what good it does you. Now you come crying to me. And I’m under no illusions about your deciding to stay here.’ He sneered bitterly. ‘I know that you thought it better not to try me. And you were wise, too.’

Mortimer had risen from his chair and was pacing back and forth down the long room. He was working himself into a rage and Evelyn shrank away from him. She conquered her fear and forced herself to speak calmly.

‘Tell me what you think so that I can show you that you are mistaken.’ Her voice was studiously placative, but it had the opposite effect on Mortimer. He halted before her.

‘You remained because you were afraid to go.’ Her head lifted proudly and he answered the unconscious gesture. ‘I don’t mean for yourself. Afraid for him. And you decided to remain because you think you can sell yourself to me at the price of his safety. Well, you can’t ! You aren’t worth it to me! And before this is over there will be no question of bargain and sale. You’ll beg me to take you on any terms.’

‘Paul! Paul! You are insane.’ Evelyn spoke beseechingly.

'Think for a moment! You are harming yourself more than any one else and you are all wrong. I'm pleading for both of us, Paul. Both of us! Let him go back to Madison and let us start over. We can. I — I'll be different.'

Head bent down, legs far apart, Mortimer's flaming eyes scorched her face. His voice had been clear and dispassionate but now he spoke thickly.

'You still plead for him! You think you can save him — Why, damn you!'

He covered the space between them in a movement that was inconceivably swift. Evelyn felt herself gripped roughly and snatched from her feet. Her husband's fingers bit into her arms and involuntarily she cried out. Mortimer shook her roughly and she was conscious of the panic of a woman helpless in the angry grasp of a man more powerful than she. Mortimer's dark face approached hers and she looked full into his eyes. They revealed depths of rage that she had not plumbed. She felt herself tossed and swept as if by a tornado.

At first she had resisted futilely but now her sense of personal dignity came to her aid and she relaxed in his grasp. Again he shook her savagely and lifted her higher. She wondered if he meant to . . .

But Mortimer recovered his sanity. He set her down abruptly and moved back. Evelyn staggered a little as he set her upon her feet. She mended the disorder of her clothing with trembling hands.

'You — you — mustn't do that again,' she said, her voice coming breathlessly. 'Not again, ever.'

Without another look she moved past him and up the stairs.

CHAPTER XX

MORTIMER stated his errand curtly to Dr. Richie when the grizzled surgeon came into the tiny office of the prison hospital.

'You've got a man over here I want,' he said. 'What is holding him up?'

'You mean Ogletree, I suppose. His hands are in no condition to return to the mine,' Richie answered, wondering at Mortimer's tone.

There was scant love between the master of Alamosa and the doctor, although each in a way respected the other. No issue had risen between them in the conduct of the prison that Richie's tact could not smooth.

There was nothing servile about the doctor, although he knew perfectly well that Mortimer held his future in his hands. A word at Montgomery that Mortimer did not approve of the resident physician at Alamosa and Richie would have been transferred or discharged altogether.

But for all that, Richie did not hesitate to stand on his authority in handling the men. Mortimer had always acknowledged that authority, sometimes grudgingly, but Richie's word until now had been final on any case in the hospital.

Richie was under no illusions about the motive behind Mortimer's acquiescence in his judgment on the human cattle that the master of Alamosa bought to mine his coal. It was the same that leads the teamster to blanket the animals under his care — that they may work better.

Mortimer wanted the last ounce of energy from the men. It was, therefore, profitable that they be as near physically fit as possible and he had never complained at Richie's judgment in the steps necessary to keep them so.

The two had had skirmishes, but Mortimer had never been really aroused in any conflict with the doctor. He had much respect for his ability as a surgeon and he suspected shrewdly why Richie chose to remain in an obscure prison position rather than to compete in the fields of science for the recognition that could have been his. It was a sort of humanitarianism that evoked only a sneer from Mortimer. But he recognized it and turned it to his own profit. He, himself, would never indulge in such an expensive and useless pastime, but if others were not so wise, it was no concern of his.

He had come to the hospital from Keller's office where an impatient question had been met with a musical negative.

'Where is Ogletree? Has he been down yet?'

'He is still at the hospital, sir,' Keller answered. 'It's more than a week now.'

Mortimer stood a moment in frowning thought and Keller's eyes caught the smouldering rage that now seemed always near the surface. Keller took pains that this displeasure should not be directed at him.

'Has Collier been told yet?'

'Not yet, sir.'

'Get him up here. I'll go over to the hospital and see that Ogletree checks in to-morrow. Have Collier wait for me.'

With that he turned on his heel and now he was making his demand of Dr. Richie.

'Ogletree has wasted time enough. I need men in the mine and I want him.'

'But you don't want a man who is crippled, Mr. Mortimer,' Richie objected. 'Ogletree wouldn't do you any good in the mine. He couldn't get his task yet if his life depended on it.'

'That doesn't make any difference, I want him,' Mortimer said bluntly. 'This is one case where I want no argument, Richie. Have him check in at the barracks in the morning.'

Richie looked hard at Mortimer. The man's face was dark and there was rage in his sullen eyes. His bulk seemed to fill the room.

'But I can't send him until he is ready, Mr. Mortimer. The man really was in bad shape. I spoke to Keller about it. His hands were infected and even then he had been strung in the doghouse. He really cannot work.'

Mortimer glowered at him and then snapped an order. 'Let me look at him.'

'Very well. He's over in the wing.'

Mortimer followed Richie through the corridor and together they entered the room where John lay on a cot looking out the window. He eyed them apprehensively but lay passive. Mortimer strode over to the bed.

'Let me see your hands,' he ordered.

John raised his bandaged fingers and at a glance from Mortimer Richie began to unwind the linen. The master of Alamosa bent for a closer look. The flesh had not fully healed and the infection stubbornly resisted treatment.

Mortimer grunted. 'Doesn't look bad to me. Not bad enough for him to lie up in the hospital here. Why does he need a private room? Isn't a ward good enough for him?'

Richie chose to answer only one of his questions. Under Mortimer's manner a little of his diplomacy left him. 'The man is in no condition to return to work. Put him in the mine again and it might be necessary to amputate both hands.'

'You think that, do you?' Mortimer looked intently at Richie, his face hard. 'I'm paying ninety dollars a month for this man and I'm not paying it for him to lie here in bed. I want him in the mine.'

'I'll send him to the barracks as soon as he is fit and not before.'

'Ah!' Mortimer breathed the aspirate and his manner

grew softly ironical. Neither paid the slightest heed to John. He was as much a part of the furniture of the room as the bed, but he had been a convict for more than two years and was accustomed to that. Knowing what was at stake he listened, the hate simmering and bubbling in his brain and firing his courage.

'Ah!' Mortimer repeated. 'There are no arguments that could move you?'

'Arguments aren't necessary,' Richie returned placatively. 'I'm not trying to be obstinate. There's no sense in sending him back when he cannot work.'

'I had thought to protect you.' Mortimer's voice was silky but his eyes were venomous. 'I see that I cannot. You, above all others in Alamosa, should want this man back in the mine where he belongs.'

'I?' Dr. Richie's question was astonished. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that it is not well to have this man and your daughter in constant daily contact. It is dangerous.'

Dr. Richie's bushy eyebrows rose. 'One minute, Mr. Mortimer. In a moment I shall ask you to explain your words in the presence of my daughter.' Disconcerted by the doctor's quiet dignity, Mortimer stood silent while Richie went to the door. 'Oh, Selma,' he called. 'Will you come in here a moment?'

John marveled at her self-possession when she came into the room. There was one calm glance at her father and another at Mortimer as she came to stand at the side of the bed opposite Mortimer.

'Yes, father?' she said quietly, her voice modulated to the monotone of the sickroom.

Richie put one hand on her shoulder and turned to Mortimer. 'Now, Mr. Mortimer, if you please, will you kindly explain what you mean?'

Mortimer answered brutally. 'I said that daily contact between your daughter and this man was dangerous. You don't want a convict for a son-in-law do you?'

'You have a basis for what you say?'

'Naturally.' Mortimer's voice was malignant. 'That was why I ordered him back to the mine. This man was my chauffeur and when my wife was injured and your daughter came to nurse her, an intimacy sprang up between them. When I saw it, I ordered him back to the mine to stop it but now he is feigning illness and in the hospital is again in contact with her. That is why I want him back in the mine where he belongs.'

'That is not true,' said Selma quietly.

Mortimer's face darkened and he pointed a finger at her. 'You are in love with him,' he challenged.

'Well, Mr. Mortimer, if I am? What then?'

John smiled faintly at her words while Mortimer stared at her in malevolent surprise. She might deceive Mortimer, but John knew her motives. He thrilled at the wonder of it. This was the woman Gideon Ames knew; he was suddenly scornful of himself that he had ever doubted.

'You do not deny it?' Mortimer said.

'Why should I? I am of age and have reached years of discretion. I care for whom I choose and certainly I am not answerable to you, Mr. Mortimer.'

Mortimer swung on Richie. 'You see!' He was heavily triumphant. 'Now will you send him back to the mine?'

A glance passed between Selma and her father. 'When he is physically fit for work in the mines, I will discharge him from the hospital,' the doctor said steadily.

'You mean to ignore what I have told you?' Mortimer demanded.

'That is a matter in which I cannot recognize your right to have a part,' Dr. Richie answered quietly.

Mortimer glowered at him a moment, gnawing at his black moustache. Then he spoke quietly.

'Very well. Since I cannot reason with you I will try other means. I want this man back in the mines and I shall have him if I am forced to go to Montgomery. You have been here a number of years. Apparently you value the position you hold. If you don't want to be transferred, send him back. Now you can do as you please.'

Mortimer turned on his heel and left the room. At a look from Selma, Richie followed him. 'I will be with you in a moment,' she said.

Left alone with John, she stood looking down on him in speculative reflection. Once she opened her lips to speak and then thought better of it. John gazed up at her wistfully.

'It was wonderful,' he said slowly. 'Why did you do it? But I know. You were trying to protect me. You need have no fear that I do not understand. I do and I am grateful. I don't deserve it.'

She did not answer and, looking closer, John saw that her eyes were filled. She stood biting her lip while the tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks. Abruptly she slumped to the floor beside the bed and John felt her arms convulsively about him.

Awed, he did not speak. The blood pounded in his ears. For such a moment as this . . . the mine was a small price.

Selma struggled silently with her emotion; her moment of weakness passed quickly and she got to her feet.

'I told you you would need all your courage,' she said, smiling mistily. 'But I need some, too, John.'

Dr. Richie was waiting for her when she stepped into the corridor. Selma did not wait for questions. 'What are you going to do about him, father?'

'Why — why, is that so important, Selma? I wanted to ask you ——'

'That can wait,' Selma interrupted. 'Are you going to send him back to Mortimer?'

'Why, of course! What else is there to do? When he is fit he will have to go back to the stockade. I shall not release him until then.'

'Are you going to send him back at all?' Selma was frowning and eyeing her father directly.

Richie's eyebrows went up. 'Certainly! Why not?'

'Because you should know what Mortimer plans? He lied in there. He was not trying to protect you. He thinks his wife is in love with Ogletree. She is the one he is fearful about and not me. And that's why he wants Ogletree back in the mine so that he and Keller can do what they please. They mean to send him over the rocks. There's no telling where it will stop.'

Dr. Richie grew irascible. 'That doesn't matter particularly — at least not now. I want to know if you were in earnest in there when ——'

Selma put up a quiet hand. 'If I were, it is something that I alone can decide,' she answered. 'At least that decision is mine. But this other rests with you. You hold this man's life in your hands. What are you going to do about it?'

Richie stared at her unbelievably; his daughter was suddenly a stranger, ignoring his authority and demanding of him a decision when the explanation should come from her.

'I shall do just what I told you,' he snapped. 'Handle his case as I would any other. When he is ready he is going back to the barracks.'

'You condemn him to torture, death perhaps. I ask you not to do that.'

For the first time there was a little break in her voice. Richie leaned forward and put a hand on hers. He looked intently into her face and his voice changed; his irritation left him in sorrow for what he saw.

'I can do nothing else,' he said and there was finality in his voice.

But Selma would not give up. 'Father!' she cried, 'you must do something. We can't sit idle and sacrifice him. He has been guilty of nothing.'

Richie shook his head solemnly. 'We can do nothing, my dear.' His tone saddened. 'I would if I could. Occasionally it is necessary that an individual sacrifice be made that others may benefit.'

'Explain!'

'You heard what he said regarding a transfer. He does not threaten and he can do as he says. Think what that would mean!'

'Think what it would mean if we do nothing!'

'I know, dear. But sometimes we cannot think as we would like.'

'Do you mean that you will not protect him because of what I ——'

Richie patted her hand and his grizzled old face under the thatch of white hair was sad. He lifted long thin fingers to scruff his beard.

'No, dear. That isn't it. As you reminded me, you have reached years of discretion. I would not attempt to dictate your life for you. I can only sorrow for you at the road that you must travel inevitably. But that is for you to decide — if you have the courage. I'll help where I can, but here I can do no more than my duty.'

Selma reverted to a name of her childhood. 'Why, Daddy?' she whispered.

Richie answered slowly, speaking with infinite gentleness.

'There are in this camp more than five hundred convicts, each of them capable of suffering as much as he. I have devoted a lifetime to the relief of their misery. With Mortimer and Keller unchecked by any feeling of human compassion,

can you imagine what would happen if I should be relieved and an unsympathetic physician placed over these men? They would lose their last protector; can you gauge the amount of suffering that would involve? I can stand out against Mortimer. I am not afraid of him and my word is not without weight, too, at Montgomery in any ordinary case. Now, dear, can I sacrifice all for a man who is no more human than they? Can I put in one side of the scale these five hundred human beings and in the other this one man and allow him to outweigh them for purely selfish reasons? The decision is a hard one, dear, but it does not seem to me to be debateable.'

Selma's head sank lower and lower as her father spoke. Every word was like a blow: she could not question the justice of what he said but she could not accept the consequences of his conclusions.

'When — when will you send him back to — to the mine?' she asked in a strained whisper.

'He will be ready in a day or two,' her father answered soberly.

For an instant Selma remained motionless and then rose slowly to her feet. Her lips were colorless and against the pallor of her face her level brows stood out with startling distinctness.

'You may accept that reasoning, but I will not!' she cried passionately, her voice vibrant. 'Send him back to the mines if you must! Give him to Mortimer and to Keller. Blood Keller! I won't. I'll find a way without your help. I am no child and I shall not stand idle and see this thing happen! I do not fear Mortimer! Now, father, what do you say?'

Richie shook his head forebodingly and replied with a sorrowful maxim of the hills.

'Jordan is a hard road to travel.'

CHAPTER XXI

YELLOW fangs showing in his habitual snarl, his small eyes glinting evilly, Skip Collier limped into Keller's office and waited the pleasure of the Cap'n. Keller was in low-voiced conversation with Mortimer and glanced at Collier when he came in.

Collier did not sit down, but stood nervously fumbling his ring of brass checks. He had forgotten to blow out the carbide lamp in his cap when he came into the open and he took it from its slot now and puffed out the flame.

Mortimer and Keller, their talk finished, turned toward him. Evil himself, hardened, selfish, afraid of nothing, yet Collier shifted nervously under their gaze. Keller's smiling eyes he knew hid depths of cruelty that would put his own passions to shame. As for Mortimer, Collier knew only what was whispered of the master of Alamosa. It was enough.

'Sit down, Skip.'

Keller spoke musically, a false geniality making his tone hearty. Collier was not deceived and sat down on the extreme edge of the chair Keller indicated. His small eyes shifted uneasily, but his face cleared at Keller's next words.

'I've another job for you, Skip.'

'Yes, sir!' Skip didn't mind those. He had done things for the Cap'n before now, but he had never ventured to presume on them. Keller daunted Collier; sheer brutality would have left him unafraid. Physical suffering he could endure with the stoicism of an animal caught in a trap. But this smiling, musical mock-sympathy; that Collier could not face. Collier often growled to himself in the dark of his entry that such a man was unhealthy to fool with.

The check-runner sat up alertly, and some of his disquiet

left him. It was no action of his, then, that had brought him to face the Cap'n. Keller questioned him politely.

'You have a man named Ogletree on your check, haven't you?'

'Yes, sir. That is, I did have. He ain't been down for a day or so. He went to the hospital that day after the dog-house.'

Keller smiled sympathetically. 'Well, he will be back tomorrow and will report to you again. It's too bad about him. I don't think he will be a good miner. Do you?'

'No, sir, Cap'n. He ain't never gonna learn much 'bout it down there.'

'Therefore the best thing to do is to get him out of the mine,' Keller said smoothly. 'That's what I'm looking to you for.'

'Yes, sir.' Collier didn't need to ask questions.

'I want you to see that he isn't favored in the mine at all, Skip. Now ——'

'What the hell is the use of beating about the bush,' Mortimer broke in. He spoke heavily. 'I want this man Ogletree sent over the rocks, Collier. There'll be something good in it for you? How would you like to be mail man? We need a man to go to Climax for the mail. You're in here for life. I guess we could trust you.'

Mortimer looked at him steadily and Skip stared back. Keller gazed at Mortimer curiously. What had come over Mortimer? He had changed completely; his very nature seemed altered. There must be something in the whispers that had come to his ears after all. That would explain his determination to smash Ogletree.

'You do this thing to suit us and I'll see that you get that job of mail carrier.' Mortimer's right eye slowly closed without a muscle of his face changing. 'After that I don't give a damn what you do.'

'Yes, sir.' Collier's beady eyes glistened. It was a tremendous bribe that Mortimer offered him. It was out of all proportion, Collier thought, to what was required of him. He leaned forward and spoke in a furtive whisper.

'There's a piece of bad roof in one of my rooms, Cap'n,' he said huskily. 'I been savin' it. Want me to put him in there? He won't know nothin' and——' Collier brought both hands downward toward the floor. The gesture was revealing of what would happen.

Mortimer looked at him coldly. 'You will do as you are told,' he said. 'No more and no less.'

Collier crossed his short leg over his long one and swallowed convulsively. 'Yes, sir.'

Mortimer rose with a word to Keller. 'We understand each other then. Be careful. I don't want any questions about this. It must be for infractions of prison discipline and the consequences of any investigation I will then handle myself.'

Keller smiled at Collier and one dainty hand caressed his purple tie. 'Now, Skip, the first thing for you to do is switch checks on him. I will attend to the rest. One of his cars can be given to some one else and you can slip the check back on your ring.'

It was a simple thing that Keller proposed and Collier was no stranger to the device. It merely meant detaching the little metal disk that marked the coal mined by Ogletree and substituting for it the check of another convict. Ogletree would think he had done his task, but the weight sheets that went daily to the warden's office would show that he had not performed his task. That would mean — whatever punishment Keller chose to inflict.

Collier grinned. 'That shore is easy, Cap'n.'

'All right. When he gets back in the mine give him a few days and then switch a check on him.'

'Yessir. Shore will. That ain't scarcely nothin' a-tall.'

Collier limped out, one long step and one short one, and smiled in evil satisfaction. His authority over the men on his check was absolute, enforced with the handle of a pick and backed by the rifles of the guards on the surface.

Gid Ames was lying on his bunk when Collier limped into the cell block and the check-runner eyed him speculatively. He hated the sturdy old convict who refused to toady to him, whom he could not bully and of whom he stood a little in awe. Ames got his ten tons each day and attended strictly to his own affairs, hence there was little that Skip could do.

But here was a chance that he had waited for with the endless patience of the lifer. Sooner or later it would come and that it was sooner here did not surprise him. He halted beside Ames's bunk and spoke sourly.

'Hey, you!'

Ames raised his head, 'Meanin' me?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, what is it?'

Collier's yellow fangs showed in his malevolent smile. 'I got a job for you.'

'You go to hell,' Ames answered. 'This ain't the mine.'

'This job's gonna be in the mine. Think I'm gonna shift you to another room.'

'All right,' said Ames indifferently.

Collier grinned again. Ames would not be indifferent at the next words. 'You're goin' in with Ogletree when he gits out of the hospital.'

'That the job?' Ames was too old a hand to show either surprise or anger at any prison order.

'Yeah. You been honeyin' up to him. Now I'm gonna put you on a joint check and you'll have to look out for him or catch hell yourself.'

Still Ames showed no emotion. 'Guess I kin. What's the idea?'

'Nemmine. You go into his room to-morrow when you go down. He's comin' over from the hospital in a day or two an' you kin kind of git things straightened up in there.'

Ames grunted an assent and Collier went to his own bunk filled with malicious satisfaction. If the Cap'n was going to send Ogletree over the rocks and Ames was Ogletree's buddy, they'd both go. Collier proposed to gratify a hatred of his own while serving Keller.

'S only fair,' he muttered. 'I git shet of one f'r th' Cap'n an' he gits shet of one f'r me.'

As for Ames he welcomed the change. He had no suspicion of the storm gathering about Ogletree and even if he had he would not have quailed. Ogletree had violated prison rules for him, Ogletree had written to the Old Woman, Ogletree was his buddy. It was a tie beyond any closeness known to the outside world.

And then Ogletree came back to the barracks, his face a little whiter, new lines about his mouth but with his eyes steady and his bitterness tintured by the memory of Selma Richie and her parting words.

'I'm not going to say much,' she told him quietly. 'Go back to the prison and do your best. You will not be alone. I do not want you to feel that you are. You will probably suffer at first. But other men have gone through this and survived, and so will you. Don't give up. You'll need courage but you are not alone.'

'Thank you,' Ogletree said humbly. 'I shall not forget and I shall not presume.' He choked a moment. 'I — I, well the thought of you will help. I — don't you think me impertinent?'

'No,' answered Selma and sent him on with a quiet smile.

When he entered the barracks Skip Collier greeted him loudly.

'Here's the pet back ag'in,' he said, his fangs showing

under his lips. 'Ready for another tussie with the mine, be you?'

'Yes,' answered John briefly, busy straightening his bunk.

'You're goin' down to-morrow, huh?'

'Yes.'

'Got a buddy for you,' Collier volunteered.

That interested John. 'Who is it?'

Collier jerked a thumb toward Ames, who was sitting on his bunk looking on with quizzical eyes. 'That's him.'

'I'm going to work with him?' John's eyes lighted. He wondered if Selma was responsible for this. Had she spoken a word in some mysterious quarter and were benefits already reaching him? Ames smiled at him.

'It'll help a right smart, son, won't it?'

'I'll tell the world!' The light phrase came oddly to John's lips. His fears lifted. With Ames in the same entry nothing much could happen to him. He only half-heard Collier.

'Mr. Keller thought you was too green to work by yourself,' the check-runner said glibly. 'He said give you a buddy so I picked out Ames. You'n him's gonna have the room you was workin'. You'n him's gonna git out sixteen tons a day. You're fourth class and Ames is a first. You git six an' he gits ten and I see that you both gits it.'

Collier laughed at that, tasting already the joy that was to come. Ames, however, ignored his mirth.

'Guess we kin do it,' he said. 'How 'bout it, son?'

'Guess so, too,' answered John. His eyes conveyed his gladness to Ames and the old mountaineer smiled back at him.

There was little more talk for the nine o'clock gong rang and silence fell. John's thoughts were not unpleasant as he waited for sleep. He was almost eager for the morning to come. As yet he had no gauge of the menace of Mortimer.

He did not appreciate the mine master's nature nor realize his implacability when once roused. John thought that now he was to be permitted to serve out his sentence and with Ames in the mine with him he would learn. He had believed what Mortimer said in the hospital.

He was almost optimistic. For the first time since his life had dissolved under his fingers as the result of a moment of weakness he looked toward the future. Selma Richie had meant it when she said that she cared, and afterward . . . it was not much to hope. John flushed warmly at the memory of her steadfast strength. On her he could lean, sure of her sustaining power. And yet, he was mad to think such thoughts. He was a convict; he would leave the prison scarred by years of discipline; branded as a thief. Yet other men had climbed steeper mountains than that. Suppose she would help. She must have changed her ideas about him or she would not have fronted Mortimer so calmly. Evelyn Mortimer was no longer involved and it could have been only because Selma wished to befriend him. It was not much but it comforted him and sent him off to sleep with a smile on his lips.

Ames waited for him the next morning after their hurried breakfast. John's stomach revolted against the fare, but knowing that he must retain his strength he forced the food down. Cornbread, a strip of fat bacon swimming in grease, molasses and coffee without sugar. He ate because he must.

John hurried into his mine clothes in the washroom and together he and Ames crossed the yard to the manway.

'Look here, son, you're pretty soft at this kind of thing,' Ames rumbled as soon as the darkness of the manway had swallowed them. 'Wanna learn things, don't you?'

'Sure I do,' John said eagerly. 'I was hoping that you'd teach me what I need to know.'

'Yeah, I thought 'bout that soon's I hearn I was gonna be

put with you,' said Ames. 'I guess together we kin git by all right. You gonna have a hard row to hoe for a while 'till you git tough. I'll save you all I kin.'

'I'll do the best I can,' John promised. 'And I'm not going to put everything on you.'

Ames looked him over. 'First thing to do is to learn how to walk so you won't be plumb tuckered out when you git to your room. There's a big trick in that. Look at me, son, and walk like I do.'

They were forced to bend over to clear the low roof. Looking, John saw Ames walking with hands clasped behind him, his head tucked down and scanning the ground at his feet. John's hands had hung from his shoulders and he had craned his neck in attempting to look forward into the darkness.

'That's all wrong,' Ames cautioned. 'Let your knees be limber, don't try to look ahead and kind of shuffle along. Ain't no use in keepin' yourself all strained up.'

John followed his instructions and was surprised to find how much it eased the long walk. He was not tired when they came to the room where they were to work. Two empty cars stood on the track.

Ames raised his light and looked at them rather grimly. 'We got to fill eight of them to-day,' he said. 'Gonta take some doin' 'f you ask me.'

He stripped off his jumper, hung it on a timber and picked up his shovel. 'Better let me do the loadin' for a little while,' he said. 'You pick the rock out and pile it over there.'

John demurred. 'You can't load it all by yourself,' he objected. 'Let me shovel till I get tired and then I'll pick rock and rest a little and then shovel some more.'

'All right,' said Ames. 'Let's go.'

They worked almost in silence. John handled his shovel awkwardly and Ames instructed him. 'Don't stand so's you have to turn around to throw it into the car,' he said.

'An' don't try to load your shovel so heavy. It's too much of a lift 'till you git used to it.'

John changed obediently. The gloves that Selma had given him protected his hands and he found that, coming fresh to the work, he did not grow tired so easily. He did not put down his shovel until both cars were filled and they pushed them out into the entry. There they saw Collier.

'Gittin 'long right well, ain't you,' he said as he felt the inside of the car for the checks John and Ames had hung there. On the surface the weigh boss would take those checks from the car and credit them to the men whose numbers they bore. In this instance it was Ames and Ogle-tree. Collier stood with them a minute but Ames did not speak to him. At last Collier grunted and turned on his heel.

'Better figger on doin' a lot of this,' he said. 'You're shore goin' to need it.'

John wondered at his words, but his thoughts were on the loading. With Ames beside him he felt almost happy in the work.

CHAPTER XXII

JOHN learned rapidly under Ames's painstaking instructions. Men do not become miners overnight, of course, but as John's muscles hardened, he ceased to go to the surface each night so exhausted that he could hardly drag one foot before the other. In a surprisingly short time, he was swinging the shovel with a minimum of effort and he came to wield the cutting pick with almost as sure a hand as Ames.

But that was not until he had been days in the mine. In the beginning he was awkward; forever bumping his head against the low roof; stumbling about in the semi-darkness; tiring quickly and terribly — for his hands were still tender.

John marveled at Gideon Ames's patience, for at first Ames not only loaded his own ten tons of coal each day but at least half of John's six tons.

John would have protested, but Ames would not listen.

'Son, didn't I tell you I'd help you out? Ain't this the time when you need it the worst? Forgot them there letters? Gid Ames ain't. Now you git out the way and watch me. I b'n handlin' a shovel for nigh onto ten year an' hit comes natural.'

Ames was tireless; he swung the shovel without a pause and laid it down only to seize his pick and work at the undercutting for the shooting gang. John did his best; keeping on until his efforts became so feeble that Ames thrust him to one side and bade him rest.

John slowly became accustomed to the mine; to the darkness. The feeling of an animal in a trap left him as he

became able to identify the sounds. And now, with Ames, there was not the ghastly sense of absolute solitude.

Ames taught John many things; how to swing his pick; how to work on his knees leaning far over to undercut the middleman — the strata of rock that divided the narrow vein of coal; to handle the breast augers for drilling the powder holes: timbering, for they must do their own timbering in addition to the loading and cutting. Under Ames John learned to sound the roof for dangerous rock: how to test the air for gas. John was unconscious of how much he learned. He knew only that the mine was losing its terrors for him.

He said as much one day to Ames, but Gid shook his head.

'Shut up, son, you don't know what you're talkin' 'bout. You ain't seen nothin' 'till you have the roof cave in or maybe run into a gas pocket with a open light. Don't tell me. I laid in the darkness with a rock on my leg an' begged 'em to kill me. My buddy would of done it, too, but they wouldn't let him.'

John's muscles hardened: he lost his fastidiousness about his food and wolfed the prison fare of fat meat, mouldy cornbread, black molasses and an unsweetened colored liquid that was miscalled coffee.

He began to feel a new confidence; his spirit gradually was freed from the paralysis of fear that had held him. He was tasting the worst that the prison held and he was proving equal to it. Of course, Ames had done that. But, at least, John had proved an apt pupil. Ames told him as much, sitting on a huge piece of the middleman that they had tossed to one side.

'Son, you's there,' Ames said, quizzical eyes smiling in admiration. 'I knowed what was in you the fust day I ever seen you. Ain't never cottoned to nobody just like I done to you.'

John grinned happily; the tribute was no mean one.

'Gid, remember one time I told you I didn't want any friends? Well, I — I was wrong.'

No more words were necessary. Ames knew what he meant, but he did not comment save for a grunt. For all their companionship there was not much talk between them. Ames was by nature taciturn, with the stoic dourness the mountains breed. John's thoughts were busy.

Once in passing from the manway to the barracks they saw the white-clad figure of Selma Richie. John's eyes went greedily to her face. Neither spoke: prison regulations — and they were in full view of every guard on the yard. But John thought Selma's eyes gave him a message of encouragement and he smiled back, his teeth a white blur in his dust-blackened face.

Ames made a furtive gesture with his hand and Selma nodded. That was all. A moment later she had disappeared toward the hospital and they were in the steamy air of the washhouse.

'That gal's a sight for sore eyes,' Ames rumbled. 'Ain't seed her in so long didn't hardly know her.' He was silent a moment struggling with the inadequacy of his vocabulary. 'She — she allus made me think of dogwood blossoms like they come in the spring up on the mountains. She an' her white dress.'

John nodded. 'I know,' he said. 'Don't forget I was in the hospital with her.'

John never saw Mortimer, but prison whispers of events at the Mortimer home reached him as they traveled about the cells. How they started he did not know, but they spread and, knowing prisons, he believed.

Mortimer was going crazy, the prison thought. 'Acts just like a wild man. They're at it ev'ry night. Funny thing, too. Ain't never said what started it.'

John was not greatly concerned. If she was in distress, it was no concern of his. He craved only obscurity; an opportunity of serving his sentence and then . . . He never allowed himself to go very far beyond that point.

He knew himself to be unbelievably fortunate in having Ames as a companion. There was none of the petty tyrannies that were often practiced by older convicts on the less experienced ones; Collier, in awe of Ames, let them alone. The mine inspectors and engineers knew Ames and respected his work. John's lot was infinitely better than those of other men in the prison.

Ames shied away from all expression of gratitude. 'Now don't you git no crazy notions,' he said gruffly. 'I seen you was in a bad way and naturally I wasn't gonna let you git in bad 'f I could help it. But you've come on fine. We ain't gonna have no more trouble and when they re-classifies you, you'll be able to carry yore end. 'Tain't gonna be long 'fore you'll be a first class man an' able to make yoreself some money.'

John had never thought about that. 'You mean that we can get more than our tasks?'

'Yeah. Soon's you git to be first class we'll show 'em a little somethin' diggin coal. You git forty cents a ton for every ton you load over your task.'

John shook his head dubiously. 'I don't know. I don't need any money. I'd rather be on top a little more.' He was thinking that perhaps he might have a chance for a word with Selma Richie.

'Maybe you don't need none, but I shore does,' Ames said.

'You! For what?'

Ames's voice grew mournful. 'You shore must of forgot. For the Old Woman. She's tryin' to send that oldest boy of mine to git some schoolin' so he won't be like his pappy.'

John sat silent for a moment and then shook his head

savagely. 'I've been keeping you out of money haven't I?'

'How d'you mean, son?'

'If you hadn't been doing my work — if they had not put me in here with you, you could have been making money for yourself.'

'Mebbe,' Ames answered simply. 'I never figgered that. Money don't count longside yore buddy, son.'

'I thought I had a reason for working hard.' John's voice choked a little. 'This is a new one. Gid, I swear I'm going to pay you back all the money you lost helping me. I will. You watch me get into the third class. Why, Gid, I — I never had any idea — and the Old Woman!'

'Shucks, son, you don't wanta take on so. 'Tain't no more'n you'd of done for me.'

'Let's don't talk any more about it, but you wait and see.'

Together they pushed the car out into the entry and hung their check on it. Then they sat down to wait for Collier. When he came he grinned at them sourly.

'Gittin' right peart, ain't you?' he said. 'Don't have no trouble a-tall. Damn 'f I ever thought the pet here would make a miner, but I guess he's gonna cause he's gotta.'

They had little to say to Collier. The check-runner did not trouble to hide his hatred of them, his malice showing in every word. But he did not come into their entry.

'Too many things could happen in here,' Ames explained once when John asked about it. 'He knows it too. Might be a rock fall or a timber give out an' he'd never git back. There's many a skeleton down here in these rooms of a feller they give out had escaped.'

They turned back into the entry and began undercutting the coal while waiting for two other cars to be uncoupled and set out on the down trip from the chainyard.

Behind them Collier took down his light and flashed it on the ring of brass checks he held in his hands. He looked over

the numbers, his lips mumbling wordlessly and then selected two. These he substituted for the checks on the nail inside the car. These bore the numbers of John and Ames and Collier replaced them with a different number.

'Been 'bout long enough,' he whispered to himself. 'Been 'bout long enough. The Cap'n ain't gonna have to wait no longer.'

Then he limped up the passageway — a long step and a short one — to the doghole where he sat and waited between trips.

John and Ames worked with only an occasional word until John laid down his pick. 'Am I really doing all right?' he asked.

'You shore are,' assured Ames. 'Don't you see how much sooner we finish now?'

'I believe I'll ask to be re-classified,' John said suddenly. 'Then I can help out with the money.'

Ames's infrequent grin split his features. 'Better take it slow,' he advised. 'No use lookin' for trouble.'

'I'm not,' John insisted stubbornly. 'But I can hold up my end. You said so and there's no use waiting any longer.'

They renewed the argument on their long walk up the manway but John was firm. He would not listen to Ames's protests and he planned to make his request at the end of the week.

Insensibly John was hardening. The days of his contact with human beings seemed in the dim past now. Had it not been for the companionship with Ames, John would have become all animal as were the men about him — beasts of burden who never saw the light of the sun save on Sundays, for Keller did not encourage bonus work and the convict who did not find his extras cut off in penalties for rock was fortunate. John did not know that but Ames did, hence the veteran's warnings.

And then they pushed a loaded trip into the entry to find Collier waiting for them. He raised his light and beckoned. 'Come on,' he growled. 'The Cap'n wants you.'

John looked at Ames and there was apprehension in both faces. What could Blood Keller want of them?

'Just like we are?' John asked and there was a faint huskiness in his tone.

'Yeah,' answered Collier. 'Just like you are. He said ride a trip up.'

John's uneasiness increased when Collier crawled into the last car beside them. 'You going, too?'

'Yeah, I aims to see the fun.' Collier grinned malevolently.

John looked at Ames who shook his head wonderingly and then settled to stolid silence. Ames did not believe in borrowing trouble.

The three of them went to Keller's office and there found the warden with Mortimer, who had been summoned by a brief message from Keller. 'I'm starting. Come over if you want to see.'

The warden nodded at John, his voice musically regretful. 'What was the matter yesterday, Ogletree!'

'Why — why nothing, sir!'

'Nothing? You didn't get your task.'

'But, sir, we did!' John protested blankly.

'Really, you mustn't disagree with me. You and Ames were to get sixteen tons and the tippie report here shows you only sent up twelve. That won't do, Ogletree. And I'm sorry, too. I thought I had impressed you with the importance we attached to your tasks.'

Ames and John looked at each other silently. What could this mean? John spoke at last.

'We loaded four trips of two cars each,' he said. 'That's sixteen tons.'

'But Ogletree, really you mustn't.' Keller spoke almost daintily, his voice fluting upward in melodious accents of protest. 'I insist that you do not lie about it.'

John shifted from one foot to the other. 'Mr. Keller, we loaded those cars,' he said earnestly. 'My buddy here will tell you.'

Keller greeted Ames with smiling cordiality. John was beginning to hate that smooth smile; the assumed regret and sympathy. He understood Ames's warning now.

'Ames, I see. Howdy, Ames. I knew you when you were here before.'

'We loaded four trips of cars,' said Ames. 'Loaded 'em good, too. Wan't no skimpin' loads.'

'Well! Well! In it together, are you? Well, if you share part of it you must share it all. Really, I am sorry. I hoped that the doghouse would have been sufficient, Ogletree. It really doesn't pay to be stubborn in prison. But if the doghouse was not enough, there are other ways, of course, of impressing our wishes on you.'

Keller lifted the whistle at his neck and blew three blasts. When a guard thrust his head into the door Keller spoke crisply.

'Tell the yard sergeant to get ready and call the whipping boss.'

At the word, Keller's face lighted. The assumed politeness dropped from him and his face was suffused with blood lust. He seemed like a hound nosing a fresh trail. His eyes danced and he passed his tongue over eager lips as he gloated over the men before him. His fingers picked at his chin and he lit cigarette after cigarette only to throw them away.

John's hands clenched. His thoughts seemed paralyzed. No need to appeal to Keller. He looked about desperately and caught Mortimer's eye. Mortimer had taken no part in the inquisition, but had looked on in brooding silence, the

spell of his dark presence covering the room. No appeal there either . . . Evelyn Mortimer! This was Mortimer's doings. Blood sang in his ears as a guard laid a rough hand on his arm and hustled him out. Beside him he knew Ames walked with head erect, breathing deeply and his blue eyes beginning to flame.

The ghastly preliminaries were soon over. The little group of men were hurried around the barracks building where another waited for them. John and Ames were surrounded by guards.

Behind them Keller strolled out of his office followed by Mortimer. They passed around the barracks and came to the group that waited in the open. Behind Keller and Mortimer Skip Collier stumped — a short step and a long one — his evil face was lighted up with malicious joy.

Keller took command. 'Which one gets it first?' Then he decided the question for them. 'Take Ames.'

The yard sergeant laid hold of Ames. 'Take off your jumper and shirt,' he ordered.

Ames obeyed. John looked on, his throat closed in horror. Ames's face was set.

'Lie down on your face,' ordered the yard sergeant.

Ames obediently stretched out on the ground, his feet extended behind him, his arms stretched over his head.

'Sit on him, you two,' the yard sergeant ordered two negroes who had stood silently watching the preparations. It was a familiar story to them.

One of them sat on Ames's feet, the other kneeled on his shoulders and the outstretched man was held immovable.

Then John saw the whipping boss. A negro, naked to the waist, tremendous biceps and rolling muscles along his back and chest mute evidence of his strength.

The yard sergeant looked at Keller. 'All right, sir. How many?'

'Ten,' ordered the warden.

The whipping boss moved out and stood over Ames. John saw that in his hands he held a black leather strap five feet long and studded with brads. It was ridged and cut and looked black and greasy. Keller nodded to the whipping boss.

'Go ahead,' he said.

The negro raised the strap over his head, and, grasping it with both hands, brought it down across Ames's bared back with all his strength.

John gazed sickened. He was almost fainting. The strap left a two-inch line of red across Ames's back. John expected him to cry out, but beyond a surge of his body that was quickly subdued by the men at his head and his feet, he gave no sign.

Deliberately the whipping boss raised the strap again and again the leather bit into Ames's flesh. This time blood sprang out on the white skin to mark the path of the strap.

John would have turned away his head but he could not. He cringed at every blow that flayed the skin. At five lashes Ames's back was covered with blood. At seven it was a mass of raw flesh. At ten . . . he turned away his eyes, at last.

The men rose from Ames's head and feet and he staggered upright. His jaws were clenched and sweat dropped from his face, but he gave no sound of pain. Instead he walked over and began to don his undershirt and jumper.

It was John's turn. The yard sergeant propelled him rudely forward.

'Take off your jumper and undershirt,' he ordered.

John obeyed mechanically. He was desperately resolved that he would not cry out. And he was afraid that he would. How much pain could he endure? He knew instinctively that Keller was waiting for him to cry out and that his screams would be music to the warden's ears.

He stretched out on the ground at the sergeant's order.

He felt the weight on his feet and shoulders. He closed his eyes and cringed and then desperate courage came to his aid. If he were killed he would not break down and beg for mercy. He heard Keller give the word.

He waited, holding his breath. He felt rather than saw the strap raised and heard the swish of the leather as it descended.

The lash bit into his flesh and his heart filled with fierce rejoicing. He had not cried out! He had not cried out! He repeated that to himself.

Across his back the lash descended mercilessly. The pain tore at him, but he locked his throat and bore it. Involuntarily he struggled, but the men on shoulders and feet held him rigidly. He could sense Keller watching, smoking a scented cigarette, a half-smile on his lips. Mortimer glowered in the background. At first John counted the blows as they fell. Then he grew numb. He thought he was losing consciousness. Feeling was beaten out of his back. The crash of the blows came only dimly to his ears. He ceased to struggle.

Suddenly it was over. The men released him and he clambered to his feet as Ames had done. He was stronger than he had supposed. He felt something sticky running down his back and knew that it was blood.

But he was proud. He had not broken down and pleaded uselessly for mercy. In spite of himself his fingers trembled as he pulled on his shirt gingerly.

Keller spoke regretfully. 'That's all. You two get back in the mine and get your tasks after this.'

Wordlessly John and Ames started for the manway. Ames's face was flint-like and John could see his jaw-muscles working, but he did not speak.

Silently they descended the ladder. The last image left on John's eyes as he descended into darkness was Mortimer's brooding figure looking after them.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE return to the mine was agony for John. The three of them went together, first Collier, then Ames and John last. When John moved his shoulders he felt as if the flesh was being lifted from his bones. His undershirt, he knew, was soaked with blood from the raw flesh.

Ames strode silently in the wake of Collier and John could not see his face. Once he stumbled and John heard him strangle a groan. The journey was interminable and it seemed hours to John before they reached the main slope where they could stand erect and in a measure ease the pain of their stripes.

When they turned off into their entry, Collier halted and raised his light.

'You fellers better git yore tasks after this,' he said. 'It's ten lashes the first time an' the Cap'n doubles the dose the next. You still got two trips to load for to-day.'

Ames did not answer and John, his head low, followed him down the drift that led to their own room. He wondered if he would still be able to work and moved his arms tentatively, drawing his breath sharply at the pain.

Ames did not immediately begin work, but hung his light on a timber and turned to John.

'Sore?' he asked.

'It — it hurts pretty bad,' John said.

'Take off yore shirt an' jumper an' lemme see yore back.'

John drew off the jumper and then attempted to remove the undershirt, but the cloth clung to his back and he desisted with a groan. 'God, it's stuck!' he said between clenched teeth.

'I know it, son, but she's gotta come off.' Ames said grimly. 'Turn 'round. This is gonna hurt some.'

John bent over and grasped a timber while Ames with one steady pull drew the shirt from the flesh that already was turning purple.

'Cut up some,' Ames commented. 'It's shore gonna be sore to-morrow. Wait a minute an' I'll do what I kin.'

He removed the top from his dinner bucket and revealed a half-gallon of water. It was his drinking supply for the day. 'That will keep it from stickin',' he said. 'Looks like you're gonna have trouble with that back. Don't wanna git no dirt in it. Put yore shirt back on.'

John drew on his shirt and then his jumper while Ames was removing his own shirt. The other convict did not wince at the pain as John had done but pulled steadily. His back, too, was beaten to a pulp and covered with blood.

'Git the water on me,' Ames ordered.

They doctored each other in the warm darkness. Neither had spoken the thought uppermost in their minds. John worked with his mind flaming in a cold rage that presently would find an outlet in speech, but that as yet was too deep to be phrased in words. His face was dark and his eyes were blazing while he worked over the long cuts on Ames's back. There were other marks there; weals and ridged scars that extended from the shoulder blades down to the hips in a network of blue scars. Under John's fingers Ames wriggled and swore softly.

'Stings like hell,' he said. That was his only comment, but his face like John's was bleak with repressed rage and the sense of bitter injustice.

Ames resumed his shirt and jumper and sat down on a lump of coal. He motioned to another.

'Set down an' let's kind of figger where we're at. Son, we dug that there coal.' John did not interrupt and Ames pur-

sued his thoughts aloud. 'F we started them cars with our checks an' they got to the surface with somun else's checks, then them checks was switched. Ain't but one feller could of switched them checks an' his name's Skip Collier.' He frowned in perplexity. 'Still, I don't rightly git the hang of things. He was takin' chances of gettin' hisself in the doghouse or maybe worse if he switched them checks 'cause he was nursin' a grudge 'gainst me. Course now, I've knowed it done an' him an' me ain't been overly friendly sence I bin here this time, but still I done my work an' he ain't never said nothin' before.' Ames's tone grew argumentative as if he were disputing the merits of his proposition with himself. 'Course now, I knows when you coops men up in cages their minds take mighty funny twists. Little things git a heap bigger 'n what they be on the outside where the wind kind of gits a chance to cool you off. One of these here fellers gits a grudge 'gainst you an' he ain't p'tic'ler 'bout what he does.' He shook his head in hopeless bewilderment. 'Some'n more to it 'n that,' he concluded. 'Skip Collier ain't gonta git his fingers in a crack or take a chance of doin' it less'n there's more of a reason 'n that. Skip, now, he's just like a suck-egg hound an' 'bout as much spunk.'

John had been listening absently, following a train of reflections of his own. He agreed with Ames. They had dug the coal and it had not reached the surface. It had not been an accident. Ames did not have the key to the mystery, but he did. For a moment he quailed at the prospect and then he was shaken by passionate anger. He remembered his sudden transfer to the mine; sent to the doghouse; Mortimer's warning to Dr. Richie and his insistence that John be sent back to the mines. There lay the answer to the riddle. Mortimer!

He interrupted Ames with a harsh question. 'Gid, when you get in bad with the big fellows up top what happens?'

Ames turned his head deliberately and spat far into the darkness before he answered.

'Son, sooner 'r later when that happens they's one convict missin' an' a new mound of dirt over in the River cemetery,' he answered softly. 'How come you ask?'

'I'm it,' John answered bitterly.

'What you mean, son? Y'ain't talkin' outa yore head, be you?'

'I wish to God I was! Hell, it's true enough.' John stared morosely before him. 'It's Mortimer and I guess I understand. I know now why Selma said I'd need all the courage I had.'

'Sho, now, you're just skairt,' Ames said soothingly. 'Mortimer ain't goin' to all that trouble 'bout that accident. He ain't never been one to mess with little things in the mine. He put you back and now he's through.'

'Like hell he is,' John said dispiritedly. 'Don't you recognize the signs? You said yourself that Collier was the only one who could shift those checks and that he wouldn't do it unless he had a reason. He takes orders from Keller and Keller takes orders from Mortimer. You notice Mortimer was in Keller's office and he came out into the — the yard for — that. No I'm the man.'

Ames groaned commiseratingly and said nothing. John spoke with a sob. 'And the hell of it is there isn't anything I can do about it.' He turned on Ames and challenged him fiercely. 'You've been here longer than I have. You know more about the mine and Keller and Mortimer. Do you know anything I can do?'

'Ca'm yoreself,' counseled Ames. 'Ca'm yoreself. Ain't gonna do you no good gittin' in a swivet about it. No, son, I cain't say as I does, 'cause the more you kick the worse they'll bear down on you. You lose comin' or goin'. Best thing's I know is to learn how to dodge.'

John again broke into passionate speech. 'It isn't enough for me to do an honest day's work; it isn't enough for me to give them the best I've got. That won't do. They've got to have the sight of blood. Well, by God, I'm not going to sit down and take it.'

'What you gonna do?' questioned Ames calmly.

John turned flaming eyes on him. 'I don't know, but I do know that I'm through lying down. For three years I've been forced to sit still and take what happened. Why, nobody ever thought I had a human feeling. And I took it and all I ask was to be let alone. They wouldn't do it. Now——'

'You was a convict,' Ames interrupted imperturbably. 'Ain't that enough?' His quizzical eyes were on John and his words were not calculated to soothe the latter's passion.

'Yes, I was a convict!' John still spoke quickly, but now his speech was a little thick, his utterance impeded by his rage. 'Yes, I was a convict, but I'm still a human being. Mortimer's after me. There's no use blinking that and you say it means a new grave in the cemetery. All right.' John forced his speech to calmness but his eyes glittered. His quietness was more menacing than his rage. 'All right. If that's going to be the outcome, then I don't want to go alone. And I don't care a damn what I do. Not a damn! Get that, Gid. I've tried being a decent convict' — his lips writhed at the irony of the words — 'But it don't pay. Decency don't pay, anyway. All right.' His voice was a snarl. 'I'll be the other kind. I haven't anything to lose.'

Ames at last preferred to soothe John. 'Mebbe things ain't 's bad 's you think. Don't do no good to jump the gun. You're talkin' plump out of yore head. You're fixin' to git yoreself kilt, that's what you're doin'. If what you say is true, don't you know that's what they're tryin' to egg you on to doin'?'

'I don't give a damn,' John said. 'I'm through taking it lying down. You've heard me call my cards and if you don't want a hand there are always ways to quit the game.'

'Now come, son, there wa'nt no call to say that. Didn't I ask f'r cards in this here game you're playin' myself? I ain't quittin' just cause the other feller's got a full house. I might draw four kings. What you figgerin' on doin'?''

John spoke viciously. 'First, I'm going to find out exactly what Mr. Skip Collier is doing and if he's switching our checks I'm going to attend to his case first and foremost.'

'Deal me in,' said Ames laconically. He rose and stretched gingerly. 'We better git busy now 'fore our backs git stiff.'

They resumed their work of loading. Movement brought an involuntary cry from John, but he bit his lip and swung his shovel. Gradually the muscles loosened and the soreness eased. Ames, too, labored mightily and then a new torment came. He began to sweat and the salt water running into the open cuts brought stinging pain that nearly set John frantic.

Ames halted when it seemed to John he could bear it no longer and they bathed each other. Ames voiced a question.

'I ain't asked you before, son, an' you didn't tell me. Needn't to now lessen you want to. But Mortimer ain't doin' all this just because you smashed his car?'

'No, he isn't,' John answered. 'Listen. Here's why.'

John told his story — all of it, beginning back in Birmingham where he had known and loved Evelyn Carruthers. The recital did not move him greatly. Already he regarded it as something finished. His voice was flat and emotionless; he might have been speaking of some one else. Ames hung on his words and breathed noisily when he had finished.

'Looks kind of cloudy,' he said. 'But she said she'd fix it so's you could git away. Whyn't you take her up?'

'Do you believe that?' John asked scornfully. 'I don't.'

Suppose Mortimer had made her send the message. Suppose I tried it and was caught. You know what that would mean. Not me. I don't propose to put my life in her hands again.'

'Son, you ain't realized yit just what's before you.'

John laughed recklessly. 'Nothing much. It won't last long, but when I go ——'

Ames shook his head but made no response and they continued their work. John's thoughts nagged him ceaselessly. Bitterness grew until it engulfed every other emotion. He even forgot Selma Richie and her proffer of aid. Ames's simple sentence, spoken with grim fatality, had robbed him of hope. But he was ugly, determined to take at least one trick in the game that was being played with his life as the stake. They were through at last, and made their way wearily to the surface. In the washroom Ames cleansed John's back with a soft rag, torn from the sleeve of his undershirt. From a mysterious source he procured a lump of fat which he rubbed into the open wounds.

'One of the boys gimme this. Hit'll keep it from gittin' so sore,' he explained. 'Now you fix me.'

John bathed and anointed in his turn and they went to their bunks. Collier was already in his place and John met his evil grin with a baleful stare. Ames did not glance at the check-runner, but went to his bunk and there sank into a study, broken only by the clangor of the nine o'clock bell. To his surprise, John fell immediately asleep, his last waking thought being of Ames, who lay wide-eyed in his bunk staring at the ceiling.

The following day was not as bad as John had feared. The fat rubbed into the cuts made by the strap was efficacious and the wounds were not nearly so painful as he had expected.

'Ain't nothin' like good mutton suet to kind of take the sting out of them things,' Ames commented. He wriggled

his shoulders in reminiscent pain. 'I know cause I been there. Guess you seen my back.'

Reflection had not lessened John's despair or his determination, only made him more wary, more deadly. Under the flail of injustice he was losing the niceties that once had marked him; he was becoming a convict in spirit as well as in body. Ames noted the change in him with a worried frown and mumbled to himself.

John had learned patience and he was determined that no false move of his should endanger him. As yet he did not know what he planned. First he must learn all he could of the mine.

Collier was wary, too. He must have sensed the menace under John's set face and Ames's grim quietness, for he never came into the entry and when the two pushed loaded cars into the drift he said nothing.

John waited two days and nothing happened. The cuts on his back were now half-healed and no longer painful. Then, without a word to Ames, he began to watch Collier.

They pushed a loaded car into the drift and Ames, as had become their custom, turned on his heel back into the room. But John halted around the first bend in the passage-way, extinguished the light in his cap and crept stealthily back until he could see Collier standing beside the loaded trip. Unmoving, John watched until the driver came and the cars were hauled away.

Ames did not speak when John returned to the room at last. Gid was on his knees undercutting the coal in preparation for the shooting late in the afternoon. Soon there was the noise of the passing trip and two empties were pushed into the room.

John did not tell Ames what he had done. Time enough for that when he had discovered something and had himself determined what to do.

When their second trip was loaded it was pushed out into the entry and they waited until Collier came. Again Ames returned immediately to the room and again John followed him, only to extinguish his lamp and creep back to watch Collier. He saw nothing.

John maintained this watch on all four trips that day and the day after with unshakable patience. His resolution hardened; let him find Collier switching checks and he would end that persecution. His lips lifted at the thought and his eyes grew hard.

He was not surprised when days passed and he saw nothing. On top they would give him time to recover from the flogging — but not too much time.

Day after day John kept up his vigil. If Ames wondered he asked no questions and John volunteered nothing. John's body hardened under the toil; his chest deepened and he came to swing his shovel with the rhythmic ease of Ames himself.

He was a man with an obsession. He lived and slept and worked and ate in his bitterness. His thoughts were concentrated on one thing — Collier. All else was blotted from his mind and always his body was tensed for the next blow from Mortimer.

And then his patience was rewarded. He crept back to watch Collier beside the trip. The check-runner lifted the ring on which he carried the numbered metal disks of his men. Reaching down into the side of the car, he removed from the nail the checks placed there by Ames and John and substituted for them one of the checks he held in his hand. Going to the other car he repeated his action.

John's heart sang within him and his lips lifted in a snarl as he moved deliberately into the light and halted before Collier.

'What in hell are you doin' up here?' Collier asked, the

quiver in his voice betraying him despite his savage tone. 'Git back in yore room where you belong!'

John's steps were cat-like as he advanced slowly toward Collier, who fell back a pace and lifted the pick-handle he carried.

'Git back!' he said venomously.

John's eyes held Collier's and he moved another pace forward and the check-runner dropped back again. Then John sprang — silently, quickly, with clutching hands reaching out, careless of the blow from the pick-handle that felled him, but not until his fingers had closed on the check-runner's leg.

John pulled him down and Collier fought for his life in the darkness; his lamp had been knocked from his cap and sputtered out. John hauled steadily toward him, lunging forward and smothering Collier under his body. Once Collier gasped; that was when John's eager fingers closed at last on his throat.

John's grip was iron and he meant to kill Collier; his fingers tightened remorselessly and the check-runner gurgled and made horrible sucking noises in his throat. His feet beat the ground and his hands tore in vain at John's wrists.

John laughed and threw himself sidewise across the man's body, twisting his neck cruelly and shutting off the last of his breath. His struggles grew fainter; John laughed again and his squeezing fingers dug deeper into the leathery skin.

Neither had spoken, but now, as Collier's life was going out, a measure of sanity came back to John and he loosened his grip. Not this way! What was it Ames had said? A rotten timbering?

His fingers relaxed and Collier gulped in the air in great gasps, his laboring lungs fighting for the oxygen that meant life.

John struggled to his feet, dragging Collier after him. He thrust him ahead and together they stumbled back into the

room. There John threw Collier against a pillar and the man collapsed limply to the floor.

‘What’s goin’ on?’ Ames demanded in astonishment.

‘Go push those loaded cars back in here,’ John ordered and Ames obeyed without question. For the moment John was the dominant one. ‘He was switching checks on us and I caught him. You’ll find the checks on those cars aren’t ours.’

CHAPTER XXIV

AMES reached a long arm over the side of the car and drew out the round brass check he found in its proper place on the nail. Holding it in the light from his lamp he scanned it closely, turning it slowly in his fingers as if the bit of metal were strange to him.

John expected anger, but instead of an outburst Ames began to whistle a queer, tuneless air between his teeth and continued to gaze at the check. Then he restored it to the nail and nodded.

'Four hundred an' ten,' he said. 'That ain't our number. I figgered that was how them checks was switched.'

John wondered at Ames's calmness. As for himself his anger had chilled to cold deadliness after his first gust of rage.

Still whistling his tuneless air, Ames restored his lamp to his cap and sat down on a rock that had been shaken down by the last shot and not yet broken up and hauled away to be used as track ballast. John waited for Ames to speak, burning eyes on his face and his body tensed for instant action.

Collier lay where John had thrown him. Under the grime of the coal dust his face was white and his beady eyes shifted from one to the other.

'Well, son, what you gonna do?'

'Kill him.' John clipped his words savagely. 'Kill him after I find what I want to know.'

'What do you want to know, son?'

'Who told him to switch those checks.'

'How kin that help us?'

John's teeth lifted in a snarl. 'It'll help me, all right. It'll tell me where I stand.'

Ames was silent and John waited expectantly. At last the grizzled convict turned to Collier who had dragged himself to a half-sitting posture.

'Well, Skip,' Ames said calmly, 'Why'n't you tell him?'

'What in hell!' Collier tried bluster. 'Let me out of here. I made a mistake with them last checks.'

'Go on an' tell him how come you switching them checks,' Ames said mildly.

Collier did not answer, and John with a swift gesture pulled the light from his cap and bent over him. 'All right. I know how to make you talk.' He moved the light closer to Collier's face and Collier squirmed aside.

'Quit that!' he snarled. 'You'll burn me.'

'I know it. That's what I mean to do.'

Ames looked on in silence. Sensing some crisis approaching, he was too wise to inflame John's resolution now and, besides, knowing the man, he did not believe that he would actually torture Collier. Ames had not suspected that John was capable of such desperation and while he watched stolidly he was already pondering the reasons for the sudden change. The bite of the lash seemed to transform Ogletree into a merciless, implacable savage. Rubbing a gnarled hand over his head he watched the battle of wills before him.

'Who told you to switch those checks?' John asked inexorably.

Collier's eyes met his in fascinated fear and for a moment he did not speak. John's hand with the light moved forward and Collier rolled aside from the flame with a yell.

'Keller did!' he shouted quickly. 'The Cap'n tole me to do it,' he began to babble. 'I ain't got nothin' agin' you. An' the Cap'n ain't neither, only Mr. Mortimer tole him to do it.'

John straightened and looked at Ames. 'You see,' he said. 'I told you so.'

'Yeah. Kind of looks as if you'd got a message,' answered Ames. 'Now what?'

John smiled at that and without a word went toward the working face with his light in his hand. He inspected the timbers as he progressed and finally stopped beside one. He paused and listened, one ear cocked toward the roof from which came a faint elusive tinkle. John reached down for a metal scraper and tapped the roof over his head. The rock gave back a hollow sound and he nodded, threw down the scraper and returned to where Ames still sat looking at him.

'That one will do,' he said.

'What you drivin' at, son?'

'It'll do for him.' John nodded toward Collier. 'We've cut away the pillars close to that and the roof is rotten. Knock out that timber and that roof'll come down.'

'You aim' for him to be under hit?'

Collier broke in with a blustering threat. 'You fellers better lemme out of here. The mine inspector'll be 'long here directly. He's due here now.'

Neither Ames nor John paid him the slightest heed. John nodded in answer to Gid's question.

'Yes, I mean for him to be under it. He won't switch any more checks then.'

John was very quiet and in him Ames saw a new man with undreamed-of potentialities. The boy was not as soft as he had seemed; but Ames was old and cautious and wise in the ways of men.

'How you aim to git away with it?' he asked.

'Easy enough. You told me yourself. Put him under there and knock out the timber. When the roof comes down he'll be a good check-runner at last.'

'You better lemme out of this!' Collier shrieked, but as before they ignored him.

'What you gonna tell 'em?'

'We've already complained about that roof. The rock is dangerous. Collier came in to look at it when we told him and it fell with him under it. Simple, isn't it?'

'You're just tryin' to scare me!' Collier mouthed. John did not even look at him.

'They don't care about accidents up top. You know they never look into them much. It ain't like I sloughed him with a pick. That's why I didn't kill him out there.'

Ames was silent so long that John moved impatiently. 'Come on!' he urged. 'It won't take long.' Still Ames did not speak. 'Hell, Gid! They beat you just like they did me, for something we hadn't done. What's the matter with you?'

Ames straightened slowly. The critical moment had come and he moved cautiously.

'Son, you ain't never kilt a man, have you?' he asked mildly.

'Gid, don't you let him kill me,' Collier cried, his voice shrill and quavering. He did not attempt to move from where he sat.

'What the hell difference does that make?' John asked. He laughed recklessly. 'There always has to be a first one, don't there?'

'No,' said Ames. 'There don't have to be. Son, you ain't never kilt a man, but I has an' that's why I'm tellin' you to ca'm down a mite 'fore you do anything. Le's see if it'll help matters any.'

'You mean——'

'Son this here killin' a man is bad bisness.' Gid spoke with sober earnestness. 'You is young an' you ain't got so terrible long in this here place. 'F you was to kill him ——'

John laughed contemptuously. 'But you know what I'm up against and you told me who'd win.'

'I know it an' maybe I was wrong. Y' can't never tell what'll happen. Son, you ain't got nothin' to take with you

when you does die an' 'f you should git outa this, an' it ain't nowise certain that you ain't, hit won't be so if you do what you're figgerin' on.'

'Gid, you tell him I won't do nothin' to him no more.' It was Collier again, babbling his words, for he could detect no mercy in John's set face.

Ogletree and Ames faced each other in the dim light. Ames's face was sober and he nodded in understanding.

'Son, I know just 'zackly how you feel. Onct I felt th' same way an' I was lookin' over th' sights of a gun. I done what I been a-regrettin' ever since. Don't you go an' make that there selfsame mistake. I ain't talkin' now 'bout what'll happen to you. I don't mind sayin' there ain't but about two chances in fifty you can't git away with it ——'

'I'll tip you off to what's goin' on. I'll do anything you want. Just you lemme outa here!' Collier was sobbing now, but his gasping breath fell on unheeding ears.

'—— 'cause you kin. I ain't talkin' 'bout nothin' like that. Hit's what you'll take away with you when you leave. Son, that's a awful unhealthy thing to live with all yore days.'

John laughed harshly. 'I don't look forward to many days down here. You know what to expect.'

'S all right, son. There's more ways of killin' a pig 'n knockin' him in the head with a axe. Together us oughta be able to step right peart an' we can put the fear of God in that there!'

He nodded toward Collier, who scrambled to his feet, stuttering incoherent protestations. John turned his eyes on him and he stilled.

'Sit down,' Ogletree ordered and the check-runner sank down on his haunches.

John's eyes turned back to Ames. 'You mean you won't help with this?'

'Don't mean no such thing. 'F you is bound to go through

with it, if nothin' ain't gonna stop you, I'm yore buddy an' I'll back any play you make regardless. But ——'

At that Collier broke out in a fresh paroxysm of terror. Ames went calmly on.

' —— I'm shore thinking' you'll be sorry 'f you do. I ain't jus' talkin', son. *I been there*. Don't make no difference what 'tis, I'm tellin' you to go slow.'

John bent his head in thought. Once he turned his head and looked at Collier and the check-runner shrank back against the wall of the room.

'All right, then!' John's tone was bitter but Ames overlooked that because he would not quarrel with his decision. 'I'm not going to get you into anything that you don't believe is wise. If I had my way I'd kill him and get it over. Such swine have no right to live. You say that would involve you and I won't do that. When the time comes, I'll play a lone hand. Understand, I'm not weakening any. They've set out to crush me and they'll win all right. A convict hasn't got a chance in the mine — not my kind of convict anyway, but before they do I'll make them feel my teeth and I'll do it by myself.'

'Son, I ain't quarrelin' with why you don't do it, long 's you don't,' Ames said. 'When you've had time to think this here thing over you'll feel differently.'

'Maybe. I won't argue with you. I'm passing it up anyway.' He turned to Collier. 'Well, what will you do when you get out of here and on top?'

'Nothin',' answered Collier promptly. John argued aloud with himself, paying no heed to Ames. 'The trouble with this skunk is that you can't believe anything he says. He's afraid now and he's willing to promise anything, but when he gets to Keller what's to prevent him from telling him the whole thing?'

Collier breathed gustily. 'Mister Ogletree,' he said ear-

nestly, and John started at the involuntary title, 'Mister Ogletree, you kin shore believe in me. I ain't gonna make no trouble. I'm gonna help you all I kin.'

'I don't want your help. All I want you to do is to let me alone. I'm not going to threaten you and if you want to go to Keller with this ——'

'I don't!' Hastily.

'—— that's up to you. You'll still sleep in the barracks.' John smiled coldly.

'Son, you shore ain't gonna regret this,' Ames said. 'Skip, here, could do us a lot of good is he had a mind to.'

'I will! So help me God, I will! Just try me!'

John answered instantly. 'All right. I will. You keep the powder for the shooting in this entry, don't you? In a box up at your doghole?'

'Yes — sir.'

'Go up there and bring me four sticks, two caps, and six feet of fuse.'

Collier scrambled to his feet and hurried out. John stared after him morosely. 'If he comes back we'll know where we are,' he muttered.

Ames was silent, staring soberly at John's set face, his own wrinkled features drawn into lines of speculative worry.

Collier returned and handed the powder, fuse, and caps to John.

'Now get the hell out of here and don't come back,' he ordered curtly. When Collier left John went to one corner of the room where he tucked the powder in a crevice in the timbering where it was hidden from view. In another corner of the room he likewise concealed the detonating caps and in a third cranny the fuse. When he was through he picked up his shovel.

'Come on, let's get through for to-day,' he said.

'Wait a minute, son,' Ames answered. 'What's the idea of them there things?'

John smiled at him bleakly. 'In all this that has been happening to me I have been without a weapon. I had to take what they did to me because I couldn't help myself. Not any longer. Not by a damn sight! I've a sting of my own now!'

Ames shook his head wonderingly. 'How you figger that's gonna do you any good?'

John leaned forward and spoke tensely. 'Don't Mortimer ever come into the mine for inspections? Isn't Keller ever in the mine? Isn't there a way to get them down there? Here in this entry!'

Ames thought he would lose control of himself and put out a warning hand, but John calmed and drew back.

'Wait until I find an answer to those questions and I'll tell you how I shall use that.'

He jerked his head toward the powder and the fulminate tucked securely away in a crevice of the timbers and, ignoring Ames's stare, bent to the work of loading the coal.

CHAPTER XXV

MORTIMER rose from the dinner table and stood for a moment looking down on the gleaming silver, spotless napery, and pink-hooded candelabra. Then he drew a cigar from his pocket and thrust it into his mouth after clipping the end. Deliberately he searched his pockets for a match and touched flame to the tobacco. All these things he did with painstaking care while Evelyn Mortimer watched him, recognizing the prelude.

Mortimer pinched out the match and tossed the smoking stick back to his plate before he spoke casually.

'I changed the men at the slope guardhouse to-day.'

Evelyn did not change color; she had lost all feeling under her husband's bullying. Her eyes closed for a moment and her lips tightened until her mouth looked pinched and strained. Eyeing her, Mortimer was content with his words. He nodded coolly.

'I've been waiting, but when Ogletree wouldn't try it, there wasn't any use waiting longer. So I changed your guards. How much did they cost you, Evelyn?'

Evelyn did not open her eyes. 'Two hundred dollars,' she said tonelessly. She did not attempt denial of Mortimer's accusation. She shrugged her shoulders wearily. What was the use of it?

'Two hundred dollars, eh? I bought them back for three and they spilled the whole thing to me.' Mortimer laughed unpleasantly, his white teeth showing under his moustache and his eyes closing until they were mere black slits in his swarthy face. 'And you thought you could fix the guards without my finding out! I've stopped being confiding. I'm not taking anything for granted.'

'I only wanted to save him and you,' Evelyn said in her flat voice. She rarely intoned her words now; her voice was expressionless. Only around her haggard eyes was the hysteria in which she lived evident. Mortimer would have liked it if she had shown greater fear; if she had shrunk from him; if he could have brought her to her knees. But eventually he would and this was one of the means.

'Save him, eh! Well, you can have what's left when I get through!' He saw her shiver at the brutal words and was content. 'Why, you can't deceive me — any more! I knew the day that you first thought of this scheme for getting him out of the mine. I knew who you went to see. And I knew how it was arranged. I let you arrange it. Did you ever wonder why?'

'No,' answered Evelyn.

She sat unstirring at the head of the table, her dinner gown of wine-colored chiffon was spangled with silver sequins that caught the light and threw dancing reflections about the walls. It was a whim of Mortimer's — this insistence that she dress for him each evening; a subtle species of baiting that roweled her pride. But she had yielded, silently, virtually without protest, and each evening she faced Mortimer across the dinner table and not even he could find a flaw in her. He eyed her brutally, possessively, and paraded his ownership and she did not question it by word or look. Nor could he prod her to rebellion. Sometimes she lifted violet eyes to his and in them he saw an unquenchable hatred that he could not break. Knowing this it pleased him to gall her nightly with half-sneering orders that she obeyed without question.

But never, since that night when he had been betrayed by a burst of anger, had Mortimer laid finger on her. His instinct warned him against crossing that frontier. And because there was a barrier he chafed and raged against the

boundary and inflicted every taunting humiliation his malevolence could devise. He wanted her to cry out in supplication.

He smoked for a moment and watched her. She had risen from her chair and stood now against one pillar of the room, her head thrown back, her eyes closed, her hands hanging listless and her mouth contracted. Mortimer did not raise his voice, rather it sank to velvety irony.

'Do you wonder why I stood back and allowed you to arrange for Ogletree's escape? Because had he believed you and attempted to take the way you offered he would have done exactly what I wanted. The law would not have protected him then.'

'It doesn't protect him now,' Evelyn said quietly.

'More than it will later,' Mortimer promised. 'And you will be there to see. But as for this, I knew it. The men are afraid of me; they're not of you. Oh, I've ways of finding things. I know the time you tried to get into the stockade gate and couldn't; I know when you telephoned Selma Richie and what was said between you. I know the message you sent him.'

Evelyn's nostrils grew thinner, her chin lifted a little, but that was the only sign that she heard. Slowly within her she felt despair rise. Night after night of this! No explanation would suffice; no plea for forgiveness could reach him.

Mortimer tired of the baiting and left her standing still and straight against the pillar, her eyes closed and her hands hanging at her side; and the sequins on her dress threw little fluttering spots of light on the walls when she breathed.

Mortimer was growing impatient over the delay and said as much to Keller the next morning. The warden smiled at him and answered melodiously.

'Can't push it too hard, sir.'

'But he's mine,' Mortimer objected. 'I bought him from you. Wasn't a thousand enough?'

'There's Montgomery,' murmured Keller, but at the mention of money his eyes lighted for a moment. 'The rules say that you can't use the lash more than once a week for failure to get a task. We don't want them ——'

Mortimer snapped a huge finger and thumb. 'What in hell do you care for Montgomery and rules? I'm backing you. Rules weren't made for me. Is it a question of more money? How much do you want?'

'He's yours already,' Keller said. 'I don't sell a thing twice, but I wouldn't try the next thing in the mine.'

'Hell! I've waited long enough. Get busy. What sort of place is he working in?'

Keller laughed dryly. 'It's one of the entries in Short Dog Slope. Rotten roof; narrow seam. He's not enjoying life waiting.'

'All right,' Mortimer growled. 'I may want to go down there and have a look myself before we decide it's time to finish it.'

Leaving Keller's office, Mortimer encountered Selma Richie in the stockade and halted her. Once more he was the Mortimer that he had been before obsession gripped him. He began without preliminary.

'Good! This saves me from going over to the hospital. Yesterday afternoon my wife telephoned you a message to John Ogletree and asked one in return. You will not deliver that message.'

'And why not, Mr. Mortimer?'

'Because I forbid it.'

'And if I do not find that sufficient reason?'

'You are an employee of the State convict department. You are a nurse here only by sufferance of Keller. Not only that, but it is a legal offense to hold communication with prisoners without express permission of the warden. Is that sufficient?'

'Yes,' Selma answered.

'Good. No contact now between you and Ogletree. Either for yourself or in behalf of'—his lips contracted—'my wife.'

'What are you going to do about Ogletree, Mr. Mortimer?'

Mortimer became very pleasant. He waved an airy hand. 'I'm not doing a thing to Ogletree, Selma. Not a thing. Nor shall I take any steps. A very unpleasant situation has righted itself, or will, provided that you and others do not interfere.' He eyed her for a moment and dropped his lightness, speaking with heavy menace. 'I mean to see that there is no interference. Do you understand me?'

'Perfectly.'

Mortimer left her with that, and Selma was thoughtful as she continued her way to the hospital. What she had seen in Mortimer's face frightened her. She had not attempted to gain speech with Ogletree since he had left the hospital. There had been no opportunity and she could foresee none unless he came to the hospital.

She did not underestimate Mortimer's warning and she had no wish to be barred from the stockade; but likewise she had no intention of sitting idle and allowing the tragedy to play itself to the end without interference.

Selma's feelings about John Ogletree were mixed, nor did she question herself too closely about them. The pathos of the hopeless odds he faced had gripped her. Where once she had been contemptuous of him, now she was sorrowful and with greater respect.

Ogletree had never told her but she guessed shrewdly that he could have taken the easy way out with Evelyn Mortimer before the crisis had ever been precipitated. Evelyn had revealed much in her misery and in the long rides with Ogletree after Evelyn's accident Selma had gained a new idea of the man's character.

Vaguely a plan had been forming in Selma's mind if events

had not developed so rapidly, but now she realized that the issues were graver even than she had feared. In Mortimer's eyes she had seen murder and it would be appallingly easy in the mine.

All her life Selma had been self-reliant; self-contained; sufficient unto herself. Now she longed desperately for some one stronger than she to whom she could submit the decision and beg for advice. But she shook her head at the thought; there was no one in whom she could confide. The decision was her own.

She had been willing to accept the responsibility when a life was not involved, but now she realized that more than mere pain was at stake. Besides, if Ogletree did not live . . .

Her face hid her thoughts and she lifted composed eyes for a survey of the stockade before entering the hospital. She paused at the sight of a figure limping toward her.

It was Gideon Ames!

Hobbling forward, he ducked his head and grinned at her painfully. She saw that his face was white.

'What's the matter, Gid?'

'Howdy, Mis' Selma. Rock fell and pretty nigh caught me. Kind of mashed my foot a little.'

'Come in then and I will have my father attend to it. Go in the operating room.'

Following him, Selma stripped the blood-soaked sock from the leg. The injury was not serious and she did not disturb her father. From months of experience with such injuries she knew what to do. When she had finished, she would call her father for approval.

As she bent over the foot, Ames leaned forward and spoke softly.

'Mis' Selma, I wants to talk to you.'

'All right, Gid.'

'Kin I talk here?'

'Why, yes.' Selma looked up in surprise. 'No one comes in here but me.'

'Mis' Selma, when I was in trouble before you helped me out. Now when I'm in trouble agin' I'm comin' back an' hopin' mebbe you kin help me another time.'

'Why, of course, Gid. I'll do anything for you I can.'

Ames hesitated and looked around nervously. "'Tain't me, Mis' Selma. It's John — my buddy. You know, John Ogletree.'

'What about him?' Selma straightened quickly and spoke sharply.

'They's crowdin' him too fur, Mis' Selma. He ain't gonna stand hit much longer. I'm feared they're tryin' to egg him on to doin' somethin' and then you know what'll happen.'

'Go on!'

'I don't aim f'r 'em to git him thataway if I kin help it. That's why I stuck my foot under that there rock so I could git to come up here. You was the onliest one I knowed of 'at could help.'

Selma for a moment felt helpless. 'What can I do, Gid?'

'I don't know'm,' Ames answered miserably. 'But I know it p'intedly ain't gonna do f'r him to keep on like he's goin'. He found out to-day that Mortimer was comin' down in the mine. John, he's got hold of some powder. Ain't no need of tellin' you how but he done so. I don't know what he's plannin' on doin', but I cain't let it go on. He's fixin' to git hisself kilt, Mis' Selma.'

Selma thought fast; the crisis was even nearer than she had feared. Once let Ogletree rebel and that would be the excuse Mortimer sought. Ames spoke hesitantly.

'Mis' Selma, from one thing an' another John has tolt me, I kind of got the idea that you'd help him — us. I don't aim to be meddlin' in what ain't my bisness, but if that's so, mebbe you could do somethin' with him.'

Selma's face hardened and she cast indecision behind her. 'I know things that you do not, Gid. I know what it is all about and there's no hope here for him. If he could get out maybe I could do something for him. I've thought that I could. But not until ——'

Ames straightened at that and his gnarled old hands trembled a little. 'How much does he mean to you, Mis' Selma?'

Selma met the issue squarely. 'A — a great deal, Gid. More than he knows.'

Ames's voice was very gentle. 'Mis' Selma, I ain't forgot what you done for me. I'll try to pay it back by doin' some-thin' for him 'cause he — he, well cause you want me to.'

'What can you do, Gid? Can you get him away?'

Ames hesitated before he answered. 'Yes, Mis' Selma. I *kin*.'

'Will you do it for me, Gid?'

'Yes'm,' Gid answered simply.

Selma laid a hand on his arm and her eyes thanked him, but she respected the reticence of the mountaineer.

'Thank you, Gid. And I'll take my share, too. You get him out of here and take him to the cave in the Rock House. He knows where it is. Wait there until I come. I'll have money and clothes.'

Selma knew what she gambled and she took the hazard without hesitation. She would have been ashamed if she had not. Surely her part was not as great as that of the man before her. But, almost bred in a prison, her cheeks drained at the thought of helping a prisoner to escape. And after Mortimer's warning.

'I got that there powder away from him,' Ames said. 'He don't know it yit, but I stole it from him. Stealin' from my buddy ——' his voice broke —— 'but I done it for his sake.' Involuntarily he asked a question. 'Mis' Selma, you're shore you want me to git him away?'

Selma's lips closed firmly. 'Yes,' she said crisply. 'Afterward — well, there's no need of going into that now. I'm not making an idle request of you, Gid. I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't think ——'

'Don't make no diffrence to me why you wants hit done, I'll do it.'

Selma had been working as they talked and now Ames's foot was bandaged. He stood up gingerly and Selma was struck by a belated thought.

'You did that just to talk to me, let yourself be hurt. That was mighty fine of you, Gid!'

'Onliest way I knowed,' Ames answered and then looked at her speculatively. 'D'you mean that 'bout helpin' git him out, Mis' Selma?'

'Yes. Why do you ask?'

'Cause I may need somethin' more.'

'What ——'

'Don't you ask me no questions, Mis' Selma. 'Tain't fitten fer you to know.'

When Ames limped back toward the barracks he was already considering the problem.

'When?' asked Selma in parting.

'Right peart,' answered Ames grimly. 'Us ain't got no time to lose.'

If Selma had known what he planned, even she would have recoiled and refused to have a part in it. But Ames pacified her with a word about 'fakin' somethin' f'r Keller' and she did not gauge his desperation.

She was thinking of other things.

CHAPTER XXVI

EVERY convict in the long cell block stiffened into immobility as the group appeared in the doorway of the barracks wing. Beside his bunk, John dared one glance before he too came to rigid attention, erect, hands at his side, eyes steadily in front of him. It was Keller and the yard sergeant with attendant guards on the regular Sunday-morning inspection.

John had already prepared; not a wrinkle marred the smoothness of the blanket on the bunk; on the pine shelf at its head the scant toilet articles were arranged in prescribed form; knife, fork, spoon, and tin plate with the tin drinking-cup in its proper spot.

He was anxious to have the inspection over. This was visiting Sunday and the convicts were permitted to wander in the yard of the stockade. In the afternoon there was to be a ball game. Sometimes Selma Richie was a spectator and to-day he hoped to glimpse her. It would be a solace; perhaps he might catch her eye. His hopes went no further, but that was enough to set his heart to beating.

Keller, the yard sergeant, the corridor stevedore and two guards walked slowly down the aisle between the bunks, pausing before each while Keller ran a practiced eye over the contents of the shelf, glanced into the open box at the foot of each bunk and sometimes turned back the mattress in cursory survey.

John heard his musical tones. 'Has this man been shown about his mess-kit? He has. Dock him two tons. The cup is out of place.'

The penalties were not infrequent. John knew that the

yard sergeant noted them on a pad he carried; later they would be sent to the tippie boss, who understood what to do. John did not know it, but this was one means by which Keller earned the monthly bonus paid him by Mortimer for surplus coal.

Keller's progress down the room was slow for he overlooked nothing. But at last he came to John's bunk and halted. John did not meet his eyes but looked steadily ahead. Behind him he heard Keller step to the head of the bunk, the rattle of the straw mattress and Keller's soft exclamation.

'Ah!'

Still he did not turn, but his heart sank for he knew that he was to be docked. He did not lower his eyes until Keller stood before him.

'What is this, Ogletree?'

The warden extended toward him a thin steel blade. It was a hacksaw! John's face whitened. Keller spoke with simulated surprise.

'Really, Ogletree, I had a higher idea of your intelligence. Too bad! You should have found a better hiding-place than your pillow. And on inspection day, too! Really, you under-rate us.'

John cleared his throat and strove to speak but no words came. This was another step in Mortimer's plan. He knew it. He had believed too easily in Collier's protestations. He cursed himself silently for his stupidity. He should have known better. It was useless to deny it but . . .

'I never saw that before, sir!' he heard himself say.

'I suppose some one else put it there?'

'I don't know, sir. They must have, I did not ——'

Keller shook his head regretfully. 'You should invent a better story than that, Ogletree. I'm disappointed in you. I've tried the doghouse and that didn't help any; I've tried the strap and that didn't improve you. Now I find a saw in

your pillow. I'm rather at a loss about you, Ogletree. Really, I hardly know what further steps to take.'

Keller was playing with him and enjoying the sight of his dismay. The warden's face was wreathed in a pleased smile that contrasted oddly with his tone of quiet regret. A spark had lighted in his eyes and once John saw him pass his tongue lightly over his thin lips.

'You should know better than this, Ogletree,' Keller resumed after a moment of silence. 'I'm sorry about this, but I must maintain discipline. I'm not conducting a kindergarten here and I've tried to teach you that you must learn your lesson. Really, I'm afraid I'll have to resort to sterner measures.'

'Mr. Keller, I did not put that saw there,' John said clearly. 'It was put there to be found. Why ——'

Keller lifted a manicured hand. 'Really, Ogletree, your excuses aren't worth hearing.' Keller turned to a guard. 'Roberts, when inspection is over, this man will get fifteen lashes. Put him in the doghouse until we are ready for him.'

'Want him strung up?'

'No-o, that will not be necessary. Take him out.'

Keller and the stevedore passed on, completed the inspection of the cell block and left the wing. The convicts gathered in little groups, talking in hushed tones. Ames stood at Skip Collier's elbow.

'So you hid the saw in his pillar, did you, an' tole Keller where to look f'r it?' he growled. 'I ought to of let him go ahead the other day.'

Collier was almost sobbing in his earnestness. 'You're crazy as hell,' he said in a shrill whisper. 'I never done no such thing. You lay off of me.'

Ames's face grew saturnine. 'I'm tellin' you now you better stay out of the mine. I ain't gonna be able to hold him after this.'

'Lissen, Gid, f'r God's sake, I never done that. I aim to keep my word. Keller done it hisself. There never was no saw in that there piller. Keller had it bent double in his hand when he run it into the blanket. I seen him.'

'Y'ain't gonna make John b'lieve that.'

'Lissen, Gid, don't you go blamin' me f'r somethin' I never done. I meant I'd help you an' I'll prove it. You wait. Don't you git that man after me agin'.' Collier was thoroughly shaken. He could still remember the iron grip of John's fingers on his throat and he had no stomach for another such experience. 'Just gimme a chance to prove it — that's all. Just gimme a chance.'

Ames did not threaten again but walked back to his own bunk. Collier's earnestness had impressed him and the thing was possible. Also it fitted in with John's belief. His face grew sober and his mind took up again the theme that had held him since Selma Richie's appeal.

Ames's thoughts were melancholy. When Mis' Selma heard of this she'd think he had failed her. And he had only been taken by surprise before he had been able to find means of keeping his pledge.

He looked about him speculatively but saw nothing to help him. Ames was growing desperate. He did not have long if Keller and Mortimer meant to continue this persecution. John's self-control was not proof against such punishment. He had not been through the fire as had Ames and learned the benefits of pliancy.

Ames's determination slowly hardened to desperation. John must get out. It didn't matter what it cost. The boy was flesh of his flesh almost and Mis' Selma, too, had asked that he help him. After all, Ames did not hold himself of great value. He looked forward to twenty years in Alamosa. 'Ain't nothin' kin skeer me 'longside of that,' he muttered to himself.

Ames set his mind to work on the problem; he did not think easily, his mental processes were slow. But he knew what he wanted.

He was roused hours afterward by the sound of a gong. 'Everybody out!' the stevedore called from the corridor as he threw the lever that released the cell-block doors. The men formed in the aisle and marched out by twos. The stevedore led them down the steps, out into the yard and around the barracks where they joined other columns of men the whole forming in a hollow square.

In the center Ames saw a familiar group; the whipping boss, stripped to the waist, the leather strap of his office in his hand. Beside him stood the yard sergeant and the two negroes who were his assistants. A little apart Keller smoked and watched, the distance hiding his dancing eyes.

Beside the yard sergeant stood John Ogletree. His face was gray but Ames saw that his eyes were burning. Ames saw him look around desperately as if meditating physical resistance, preferring death to submission. Then Ames saw his face change and droop.

The preliminaries were soon over. John had been stripped to the waist. He failed to move at the yard sergeant's order to lie face downward and the man pushed him sharply. John's knees gave way and he crumpled up. At a gesture from the yard sergeant the negroes straightened John's passive figure until he lay stretched at full length before the whipping boss. His head and ankles were seized and the whipping boss stepped forward.

Keller's voice cut the silence. 'Fifteen lashes.' Then he raised his voice. 'You men were brought here to see what happens to those who try to escape.' He nodded to the whipping boss and the giant negro raised the brass-studded strap . . .

In Keller's neat little office just inside the stockade entrance, Mortimer faced his wife. He was smiling, but his eyes smoldered. Across the desk from where he could look out the open window, Evelyn met his look listlessly.

'You've brought me here for something,' she said wearily. 'What is it? Get it over quickly, please.'

'There is no need for hurry, is there?' asked Mortimer. 'You are comfortable, are you not? And you are with your husband. Does that not please you?'

'No,' said Evelyn.

Such monosyllabic answers seemed to sting Mortimer; his swarthy face grew dark as the blood crept up toward the black hair. But he controlled himself and spoke blandly.

'You do not care to be with me any more?'

'Here?' Evelyn had been sitting with closed eyes. Now she opened them and gestured about. 'Hardly.'

'The place makes little difference, don't you think?'

'Why did you bring me here? You had a purpose, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'What?'

'You will know in good time.'

Evelyn lifted a weary hand to her face. 'Paul, where is all this to end? Cannot you see what you are doing? Don't you know that you are making impossible any future for us?'

'It will end when I have done what I want.'

'And what is that, Paul?'

'I have told you. You know.'

'You want to break me, I know. And John — he's an innocent victim — God knows what you want to do to him.' She grew more earnest. 'I wonder if you really want to break me, Paul.'

'Yes.'

'Paul, are you sure you do? Very sure?'

'Threatening me?'

'No. Merely asking you. You know a thing like that isn't done without consequences. Have you ever stopped to consider what the consequences might be?'

Her words maddened Mortimer. He leaned forward and his eyes burned her. His huge hands patted the desk, but it was more impressive than if he had pounded.

'Damn the consequences! Afterward will be time enough to think of them! Consequences!' He laughed harshly and the tension of his manner eased. 'There will be none — for me.'

Evelyn nodded quietly. 'Very well,' she said indifferently. 'If that is what you think, I suppose that it is useless to discuss things further. You can break me; I've felt that for some time. I just wondered, that's all.'

Mortimer seemed waiting for something, she thought. His eyes kept wandering to the window. She heard the sound of marching feet but was too incurious to glance around for an explanation. She was intent on the man before her.

'Paul, I'm going to venture one last appeal. I have pleaded before this for John and for me. Now I'm pleading for you. Don't do this thing — whatever it is — that you have planned. I —'

A scream stopped her; a scream of a man in agony. Evelyn's cheeks blanched at the terrible sound. For the moment she did not understand and stared questioningly at her husband.

He nodded complacently and her eyes widened as she comprehended.

She sprang to her feet, hands gripped tight, eyes searching her husband's face in incredulous horror.

There was no diminution in the cries; they came in the window with fearful distinctness . . . shrill . . . telling of a

man in mortal pain . . . stripped of all sense except that of suffering . . .

'That — that was why — you brought me here,' Evelyn whispered.

Mortimer nodded. 'Yes. That is he. I promised that you should hear.'

Evelyn lifted her hands to her ears to shut out the frightful sound but it was in vain. The cries were fainter now as if the man were weakening. They had run together, no longer distinct — more moans than cries.

Evelyn crouched in her chair, burning eyes on her husband who smiled back at her in obvious enjoyment of her dread. Evelyn's lips tightened. Once her eyes wandered to the racks of rifles in the corner. Mortimer followed her look and his smile broadened.

'They're locked,' he said softly.

Evelyn's eyes went round the room; there was a hunted look about her. The screams in the distance grew fainter and then ceased. . . .

Mortimer gazed his fill and then rose. 'That's all,' he said. 'We'll go home now.'

'Home!'

Scorn and hatred and helpless impotence were packed in the one word, but Mortimer affected not to notice. 'Yes, home. You've just time to dress for dinner.'

'Are you satisfied now?' Evelyn cried.

'For the time being,' answered Mortimer. 'Come, you must hurry to dress.'

For a moment Evelyn seemed minded to rebel. She stood and gazed out the window at the lines of convicts marching back to the cell-blocks.

Behind them, walking slowly, a group carried a limp figure. The distance was too great to recognize his features, but she shivered and turned away.

At the door Mortimer waited, watching her face intently.

She went out in answer to his beckoning hand, with one last longing backward look at the rack containing the rifles, with bandoliers of steel-jacketed bullets.

CHAPTER XXVII

SKIP COLLIER came tumbling into the room where John and Gid were on their knees undercutting the middleman for the afternoon shooting.

'Hey, Mister Ogletree!' he cried. 'Now I kin prove what I tole you! Now I kin show you I wa'n't — how I feels.' Neither John nor Ames rose but paused in the use of pick and scraper and turned their lights on him as they looked around.

'Well, what is it?' asked John.

Ames had told him of Collier's denial of responsibility for discovery of the saw by Keller. John had not commented for he was then in no condition to think coherently.

'They broke me, Gid,' he had said, his voice choked. 'They broke me and I screamed. I — couldn't help it.'

'Mighty few of 'em kin, son,' Ames answered.

'But I cried and I begged,' John persisted. 'With Keller there laughing.'

'They all do, son,' Ames comforted.

John had been lying on his bunk; into the lacerations of his back Ames had worked the tallow supplied from some mysterious source. John had not lost consciousness, although he was limp and helpless when the stevedores dumped him on his bunk. He and Ames had spoken in low tones while Ames worked over him and the other convicts looked on in rough pity.

John looked up at Ames. 'Gid,' he said. 'This is the last time I'll go through this. I'll die first.' Ames had comforted him as best he could. But his words did not convince himself and always John returned to the one thought. 'I screamed and begged, Gid. I won't go through that again.'

Once John's first pain was eased he had said little, but Ames was not deceived by his quietness. Under his taciturnity Ames knew he was thinking, and Gid's own brain struggled with the problem of how to forestall the tragedy he saw was inevitable.

He had tried to draw from John some idea of what impended but with scant success.

'I'm not going to involve you in anything, Gid,' he said inflexibly. 'You aren't situated like I am. You don't need to know anything about it.'

In vain Ames argued for a share in his venture, whatever it was, but John was adamant. After that there was less talk between them and they worked in virtual silence. It was so that Skip Collier found them when he came stumbling into the room.

'Well, what is it?' John repeated curtly. Despite the efforts of the check-runner to placate him he had remained suspiciously aloof.

'Mr. Mortimer an' Mr. Keller is comin' down here!'

His words were electric. John and Gid got slowly to their feet.

'I see,' John commented. 'When?'

'Day after to-morrer!'

'How do you know?'

'Mr. Keller called me in to know how come I hadn't switched no more checks an' ——'

'What did you tell him?'

'I lied.' Collier was conscious of virtue. 'I tolt him I never figgered he'd want anything more 'till a little more time after the other day. Him an' Mr. Mortimer argyed 'bout it right smart an' th' upshot of it was they both is comin' through here day after to-morrer.'

'All right. Much obliged.' John spoke grudgingly, but Collier burst into slobbering gratitude.

'Now, ain't you satisfied 'bout that saw? I never had nothin' to do with hit.'

'I guess so. Beat it. What time will they come down?'

'They never said an' I don't know.'

Collier left and John nodded at Ames. '*Te morituri salutamus*,' he said.

Gid stared. 'I didn't git that, son.'

'I didn't suppose you would,' John smiled dryly. He thought a moment to choose a simile that Ames would understand. 'That's what they said in the old days when they got ready to shoot the works.'

Gid could comprehend that and he nodded. 'I git you. An' you is aimin' to shoot the works?'

'Day after to-morrow.'

'What you figgerin' on, son?'

'Never mind. You aren't in on this. You're going to get hurt again and go to the top.'

'Won't argy that with you a minute, son. I'm yore buddy an' I'll be where you is.' Mentally Ames determined that it would not be in the mine, but he carefully hid his thought. 'Come on, loosen up on what you aims to do.'

John chose to be circuitous. 'You read the Bible, don't you, Gid?'

'Son, you forgot I ain't never had time to learn. But I've hearn Brother Shoemaker read plenty.'

'Ever hear of a man named Samson?'

'Him what kilt all them folks with the jawbone of a mule? Yep. I've hearn of him. He's the feller that pulled the house down 'round him when they pestered him too much, wan't he?'

'Exactly, and that's what I'm going to do.'

'I don't rightly git you, son.'

'My Samson's up there.' John nodded toward the crevice where he had hidden the powder and the fuse. 'When

Mortimer and Keller come in here.' He paused and made an eloquent little gesture. 'I'm going to pull the temple down about us.'

'With them under hit?'

'Yes.'

'But that'll git you, too.'

'Cheap enough,' John answered coolly. 'Two for one. And I'm gone, anyway.'

Gid opened his lips to speak, but one look at John's face told him the futility of it and he closed them again. John was speaking easily, as if he were explaining a simple problem in mining.

'There's that rock up there we've had trouble with ever since we've been in here,' he said. 'I'll drill a hole in behind it. I think about four sticks of powder, a cap, and about two feet of fuse will be enough. Powder shoots down and when the timbers are knocked out ——' He spread his hands. 'That's all.'

With the words he dropped to his knees, seized his pick and calmly resumed the work of undercutting. Ames joined him in silence.

The great gamble must be made this very night. He was not ready but there was no time. John should not die with Mortimer and Keller. He didn't give a damn about them, but John! There was Mis' Selma. She wanted John. And Gid, himself, was not ready to die although he was not afraid.

'Jus' ain't a mite of use,' he murmured. 'Ain't noway to fix things. He's got all the time there is 'fore him. Ain't like me with nothin' to look forward to.'

John looked over at the mumble. 'What did you say?' he demanded.

'Nothin',' answered Ames and began to swing his pick, grunting in unison to the strokes.

When they had finished their tasks, they gathered their dinner buckets, refilled their lamps with carbide from their pocket cans and started out the main slope.

Ames paused at Collier's doghole with a demand. 'How much carbide you got?'

Skip stared at that but he answered promptly. 'I got my can full an' two or three pound more.'

'Gimme it,' Ames ordered.

'What the hell? You know the storekeeper ——'

'Gimme that carbide!'

Collier handed it over with judicious haste and Ames filled the metal flask he carried. He bade John do the same and then poured the remainder of the gray lumps of what looked like rock but what really was calcium coke into the pockets of his jumper.

'What's the big idea, Gid? We don't need all this for our lamps.'

'I never asked you no questions, now don't ask me none,' Ames snapped. His nerves were frayed.

John obeyed without question and when they left for the surface every pocket was filled with the little gray pebbles.

'Don't you git close to no water with them things or you'll play hell,' Ames warned.

In the washroom Ames ordered the transfer of all the carbide from their mine clothes to the white jumper of the barracks suit. 'Lemme do it,' he whispered to John. 'You watch him.'

John screened Ames from the sight of the guard who sat on a raised platform and watched the men change their clothes. The transfer was quickly made and they bathed and emerged from the washhouse in white.

'I was skairt of that.' Ames breathed a gusty sigh of relief. 'That ain't all. Now you gotta do part of this. Don't ask me no questions but do what I says. We're goin' to the

store. You tell him you broke yore pick this mornin' an' you want a-nother one. The picks is in the back an' he'll go back to git one. That's what I want.'

It was as Ames foretold. Up against the barrier at the door of what was really a supply-house, but known to convicts as the store, John told the convict keeper of his need for a new pick. The man turned toward the back of the room where picks and shovels were stacked. Out of the corner of his eye John noted that Ames's jumper was slung carelessly over his right arm. But he did not take his eyes from the storekeeper. The man returned with a pick and started to hand it over, but paused. 'Where's yore other one?' he demanded.

'I — I left it down there,' John answered.

The storekeeper drew back the pick he extended. 'Hell! don't you know no better 'n that? You gotta turn in your other one 'fore you kin git a new one.'

John was nonplussed for a moment, but Ames spoke instantly at his elbow.

'Dang ef I didn't fergit that. We'll bring it up to-morrow.'

They walked toward the barracks. 'What was that for?' asked John curiously.

'Nemmine,' Ames answered shortly. 'That there carbide is stacked clost to the counter.' He grinned. 'I got considerable of a reach when I stretch myself.'

At their bunks they separated to wait for the supper gong. Many of the convicts had not come up from the mine and no one was near. Watching closely, John saw Gid slip a can into the wooden box at the foot of his bunk. It was a can of carbide. What could he want of all that? He must have nearly seven pounds, enough to last them for a week. And why steal it when all they needed could be had for the asking?

Then he dismissed it and fell into somber thought. To-

morrow he must drill the hole above the rock and plant the powder. His face grew grim at the thought. If only Keller and Mortimer could know that he had done it. But the end would be too swift for that. About two feet of fuse. They would not be watching him. It would be easy to touch his lamp to the hidden fuse and after that . . . He thought somberly. He was not afraid to die; it was better to go suddenly than endure the long torture that faced him. And he would not go alone. He hugged the thought and savored it savagely.

He ate supper mechanically. One more meal of this and the food would no longer sicken him. Once he thought of the past and what might have been his, but put it away. Too late for that now. He continued his brooding after they came back to the barracks from the mess hall. Ames, too, had seemed preoccupied, but John did not notice. He was busy planning . . . there must be no mistake . . . He would have liked to have seen Selma Richie . . . She had tried to help but the odds were too great. Once he thought of Evelyn but put it away with a curse . . . But for her . . .

The barracks quieted instantly with the nine o'clock gong and presently John's thoughts merged into a background of misery and regret and he slept.

Across the aisle on his bunk Gideon Ames lay with closed eyes and simulated sleep. He had three hours before he could begin work. Then . . . Time dragged. The men around him breathed stertorously. Presently Ames opened his eyes cautiously. From where he lay he could see the corridor stevedore through the bars. The man was seated at his desk and he watched him with motionless patience.

He knew exactly what he planned. Mis' Selma had asked it and John . . . He did not mean to see John carry out his threat. It had not been a threat but a declaration of inexorable purpose.

Ames, himself, might fail. There was a possibility of that, but he accepted it coolly. He was not afraid to die. And if he succeeded . . . Dogwood Mountain called him and the purple distances of the Warrior hills . . .

Watching the corridor stevedore, Ames saw him rise from his desk and yawn as the night warden came up from the floor below. Ames knew what that meant. It was the midnight check. Only a little time now. He saw the stevedore and the night warden disappear into the opposite wing and when they came back he pulled the blanket around his chin and feigned sleep.

The midnight check was perfunctory. The two men passed between the rows of bunks, swinging a flashlight on each to see that it was occupied. They passed down one side and then back along the other and into the corridor. The cell-wing door closed behind them and the lever came over that locked doors and windows.

At the stevedore's desk they paused and Ames heard them laughing. He opened his eyes and waited for them to follow the nightly routine. He had known sleepless nights before this. After the midnight check the stevedore and the warden went to the mess hall on the floor below where they were served coffee from the kitchen. For perhaps fifteen minutes there would be no man at the desk.

Ames's muscles tightened and he waited impatiently. He was very cool and his hands were steady. The prospect of the gamble with death did not move him. The stakes were sufficient and he did not shrink the hazard.

He saw the stevedore yawn again and stretch his arms. 'Guess it's 'bout time for coffee,' he heard him say. The warden agreed and the two disappeared. Ames could hear their steps on the stairs.

He lay unstirring for a moment and then threw back his blanket. He was fully dressed save for his shoes. He stood

erect and drew a long breath, then began working swiftly, making every second count.

He spread an undershirt on the floor and into it emptied the carbide from his jumper. From the box he drew the can of carbide and added that to the pile, then tiptoed over to John's bunk for the carbide in his jumper. Ames paused a moment and looked down at John . . . then moved swiftly back.

He emptied the pockets and gathered up the shirt in a sort of sack. Then he leaned over his bunk and began pulling straw from his mattress. This he stuffed inside his shirt until it bulged about him.

He straightened and looked about him cautiously. There was no sound save the heavy breathing from the men who slept in exhaustion. Satisfied, Ames padded down the corridor toward the end of the building. Here he knew was a partitioned space where spare clothing for convicts was stored. The closet was locked but the door was held only by a flimsy staple and this he twisted off with one powerful tug.

He was working too swiftly for thought now. His time was all too scant for what he must do. It was blacker inside the closet than in the corridor, but his questing fingers told him what he needed to know.

He clambered up the shelves until his hand touched the rough boarding that ceiled the structure. He felt along the planks until his fingers found a crack. He pulled and the board gave slightly. He set himself for a greater effort. This was the moment of greatest danger. If the ripping board should make enough noise to be heard outside — It was a chance he must take and he did not hesitate.

He pulled steadily and the plank gave but did not break. He thrust his other hand into the opening and threw his full strength into his arms. Suddenly the board snapped.

The sound was startlingly loud in the stillness and he

listened but there was no movement from outside. Again he tore loose a board and waited; then a third.

Ames reached up inside the hole he had made until his hands touched a joist. Deliberately he drew himself up, wriggling free when the bulge of his shirt caught on the jagged ends of the plank. The hardest part was over but it meant precious moments gone. In the darkness he worked with swift certainty.

From his shirt he took the straw he had pulled from the mattress and stuffed it down against one corner of the roof. Under it he spread a canvas jacket he had caught up from the room below.

He had thrown his sack of carbide into the attic before him and now he dumped it on the straw, spreading it out in a thin layer.

There remained but one thing to do. He scrambled down and moved swiftly to his bunk. As he snatched up his cup a glance told him that the corridor stavedore was still downstairs. He filled the cup at the faucet in the center of the room and again ascended into the roof.

His eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and he did not spill a drop of the precious water. Feeling carefully to locate the confines of the heap of little gray rocks on the straw and the jacket he sprinkled the water lightly on the pebbles.

Instantly his nostrils were assailed by the pungent odor of the acetylene gas generated by the action of the water on the calcium coke.

He dared not wait. It was a moment of danger for him. There might be an explosion when he struck the match he held in his hand. He breathed a prayer and drew the match downward so that when it flared it was just above the carbide.

There was a little puff and a line of blue flame shot along

the heap of carbide. Ames poured more water from the cup and watched the flames leap higher instead of being extinguished. More water more gas. More gas more fire. Recklessly Ames emptied his cup and watched the resultant blaze.'

In a moment the pine boards of the barracks caught where the resin was fried out of them by the merciless sun. In an instant the flames were burning fiercely. Ames gazed for a moment and was satisfied. No danger of that burning out.

He dropped through the ceiling into the closet, stumbled over the piles of clothing and closed the door softly. He padded back to his bunk and stood for a moment listening. He had been only just in time. He could hear the steps of the corridor stevedore on the stairs.

Ames got into his bunk and pulled the blanket around him. He was fully dressed and keyed to a tremendous tension. All about him men were sleeping quietly and Ames chuckled harshly at the thought of what the next hour held for them.

He waited poised for the first cry of alarm that would tell him that the fire he had kindled had been discovered. Then he must waken John, bid him dress and be ready, for then would come his opportunity to keep his promise to Mis' Selma.

He listened anxiously. The great gamble approached. How much headway could the fire gain before discovery? Would the convicts be released from the building? It would burn like tinder and there were no means of checking the flames at Alamosa. It was one of the oversights of the Company. Ames grinned at the thought.

He faced the risk resolutely. Release might come too late or not at all. He and John and the rest of them might die in the flames, trapped by the bars at the door and windows. Too late, though, to think of that now.

He sniffed the air but there was only a faint odor of smoke. Once he thought he heard the crackle of flames.

If these men died it would be his doing! For a moment he regretted what he had done, but he put the thought away. They'd have to take their chances. Ames had been too long in prison not to know that each man first looks out for himself. There is little kinship of misery in prison.

The long building was quiet. Ames was sure he heard the crackling of flames now. The minutes dragged. Should he wake John? No. He began to grow uneasy at the delay. The fire must be eating its way along the roof.

Then came the thing for which he waited. Above them there was a crash and a roar and the windows lightened. The fire had burst through the roof.

Simultaneously came three rifle shots in staccato succession and he heard a voice raised.

'Stevens! Hey, Stevens! For God's sake! The barracks is on fire.'

With the words and the shots pandemonium broke loose in the cell-block. Men sprang from their bunks and looked at each other questioningly. From outside came cries and shots and the sound of running feet. And above it all was the roar of the flames.

Already the air in the room was hot and stifling.

Ames slipped his feet into his shoes and stood up. Ignoring the shouting, gesticulating men about him he made his way to John's bunk.

The moment of their hazard was at hand.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CRAZED by fear, the convicts jammed into a close-packed mass about the door leading into the corridor and howled their appeals for release.

Some tugged at the half-inch steel bars of the door with frenzied but unavailing strength. Others glared into the empty corridor and bellowed their supplications in a crescendo of terror.

Their cries were not coherent; they degenerated into animals — fighting savagely to get closer to the door until those nearest the walls were held immovable. They wanted freedom from the roaring horror that snapped at their heels and whose hot breath already they could feel at their backs.

It was not a pretty sight; there were imprecations; sobs; prayers; appeals. Those behind fought ever to get closer to the door and those in front resisted to save themselves from being crushed. They had lost all reason; each thought of nothing save himself.

Here and there about the cell-block that was now brilliantly lighted from the glare outside were men of sterner courage, who held themselves aloof from the maelstrom about the door. These looked on calmly, a half-sneer on their faces. Now and then they glanced toward the end of the corridor where tongues of flame were beginning to shoot downward; they estimated coolly the time before release would be useless and stolidly prepared to die.

Ames did not look toward the flames that ate their way forward with appalling speed. The room was filled with smoke that made breathing difficult but not for an instant did Ames falter. He had made his gamble and now the result

rested with those whom he could not control. No effort of his could change the outcome; he could only prepare to reap the fruits of victory if he won.

John was as calm as himself when Gid reached him. Ogle-tree had not troubled to dress but sat on the edge of his bunk and watched the fire that was creeping downward. He glanced up at Ames.

'Think they'll let us burn, Gid?' he shouted above the roar and his voice did not quiver.

'Course not, son. Git yore clothes on quick an' be ready to do what I tells you. Ain't no time to do no 'splainin' now.'

John dressed rapidly and without question. When he stood erect, Ames seized his arm and pointed to the struggling, howling mass about the doors.

'They'll open the doors in a minit,' he said. 'Don't you git in the first rush. Kind of hang back and tag alongside of me.'

Even as they looked there was a fresh upheaval at the door and the screams of fear changed to cries of welcome and renewed supplication. The mass surged and swayed. A man was crowded out and instantly tore desperately at those whose backs were turned and who thrust him relentlessly away.

From outside the door a voice was raised in a bitter oath.

'Get back, damn you! Get back! You've got the door jammed and I can't open it.'

The crazed men paid no heed to the guard's order but Ames heard and his hand tightened at John's elbow. 'That means us, son. Somebody what's got sense has got to clear 'em away from that door.'

John nodded. Ames bent to shout into his ear. 'You go fust. I'm comin' right behind shovin' you. *Now you go through to that door. Ready?*'

John nodded and set himself. For an instant he had a

hysterical thought that this was glorified football with lives at stake instead of yards. He felt Ames's hands on his shoulders. He lowered his head and charged the tightly packed men.

Into his driving legs John put every atom of his strength. He went through the crowd as the prow of a speed-boat cleaves the water. This was no time for niceties and he was merciless, tearing, pulling, trampling, dragging men down, flinging them to one side. Under his feet something soft wriggled and there was a shriller scream above the bedlam, but he did not pause.

Behind him he could feel the resistless surge of Ames's mighty shoulders. He was buffeted, torn, crushed, the breath beaten from his body but he drove onward and in an instant had reached the door.

Beside him was Ames, his clothing torn, his face dripping blood, and his eyes blazing with the glory of battle; and behind Ames were other men who had watched and calmly prepared to die. They had not lost their heads and, quickly sensing what Ames was about, had joined him and had split the crowd as a knife does an apple.

Confronting him through the bars was the convulsed face of a guard. In John's eyes the man saw sanity and appealed to him.

'Pull this door back. It opens inward and they've got it jammed.'

The men about him heard and faced about. Locking arms they pushed backward with feet braced against the wall, heedless of the blows that fell on them.

They cleared a little space and the sweating, cursing guard thrust his body between the steel-barred door and the jamb.

'Now!' he called and with John tugging mightily the great door swung inward and the way to freedom opened to the men.

There was a rush for the opening; for an instant the living stream was dammed by its own struggles and then it burst and flowed into the corridor, overturning the guard, who picked himself up and, with a glance inside, raced down the steps shouting to gain some semblance of order.

Caught in the eddying whirlpool of the jam at the door, John locked his arms about the bars and held on. In an instant the pressure was relieved and he found himself facing Gideon Ames whose grizzled old face was still alight.

Catching the contagion of the panic, John shouted, 'Come on, Gid!' and would have joined the rush for the steps but Ames halted him.

'Wait a minit, son. I gotta see that there ain't nobody else in here.'

'You fool, that roof will fall in a minute. Come on out of this!'

'Just 'bleeged to do it,' Ames called over his shoulder and disappeared into the smoke.

John paused irresolutely, but he could not desert him and plunged into the smoke. He bumped into Ames in the thick air.

'Ain't nobody here. Come on!'

With bursting lungs they ran for the stairs and down them into the open, where they found the guards attempting to herd the men together into one corner of the stockade while others sought unavailingly to find means of checking the flames.

Even as he looked John saw that the prison structure was doomed. The guards, all too few to stem the panic of the men, wielded the butts of their rifles mercilessly on stragglers, holding the men in a huge group just beyond reach of the fire.

From the tipple the siren on the hoisting engine was bellowing, summoning every civilian in Alamosa to the prison.

John would have joined the other convicts, but Ames reached out and pulled him into the shadow of the machine shop and urged him along at a run in the covering darkness.

'Come on, son,' he said. 'They're gittin' 'em together back there. We was lucky comin' out late like we did. They never saw us. Now you follow me.'

John was too excited to question. The electric arcs appeared sickly in the red light of the flames and the other buildings threw heavy shadows. Ames sneaked rapidly along until they were outside the range of the brilliance and then halted gasping.

John asked the question that was uppermost. 'What made you go back, Gid?'

'Had to, son. I set that there fire an' I couldn't come out myself till I knowed wa'n't nobody else in there.'

'You set the fire! How in hell did you ——'

'Ain't no time for talkin'. We got plenty to do yet. See anybody out here?'

'Why ——' John began, but Ames shook his head impatiently.

'Plenty of time for that later. Right now we gotta git out. That there bisness back yonder ain't gonta last long. We're leavin' Alamosa to-night for good.'

John jumped at that and ceased to question. 'The hell we are! Come on then! Don't waste any more time.'

His reaction was instinctive; he did not stop to reason. He was still quivering with the madness of that fight at the door. But Ames's calmness was unshaken.

'Take it easy for a minit, son, 'till we locate ourselves.'

They had come around the machine shop, past the storehouse and along the shadow of the fence to a corner where the ten-foot boards ran down close to Silver Lake.

'How are we going to climb that fence, Gid?'

Ames glanced up at the towering barrier, surmounted by

three strands of barbed wire. 'Ain't gonna climb it,' he said. 'Twouldn't do us no good ef we did. Them wires is charged with 'nough 'lectricity to send us to Kingdom Come.'

John had forgotten that. They walked slowly along the fence. Gid seemed to be looking for a particular spot. Behind them the uproar and the shouting was undiminished. The flames were leaping high into the sky now and looking back John could see figures running about.

Ames paused at last at the corner of the stockade fence where a ladder led upward into one of the watch-towers that studded the stockade at hundred-yard intervals.

'Ready to face a gun?' Ames asked, crouching in the darkness. He outlined his plan in rapid undertone.

'He ain't gonna be expectin' nothin' like this. He's gonna be watchin' the fire an' watchin' the men at the fire. He ain't seen us or he'd of said somethin'. I'll go fust an' when I jump him, you knock him in the head.'

'Kill him?' asked John and was relieved when Ames answered.

'Hell, no. I ain't hankerin' to be killin' just to be killin'. But ef he sees who we is they'll be on our trail 'fore another hour. 'Member now, when I jump him you knock him in the head with the fust thing comes to your hand.'

John nodded grimly. He had surrendered all direction to Ames. Later there would be time for thought. Now he was keyed up to tremendous tension.

John watched Ames's stealthy ascent of the ladder that led to the watch-tower, which was only a wooden shack on stilts built flush with the wall and having windows all around it. He crowded on Ames's heels. Just over the wall lay freedom and only one man in the way! He hoped the guard would not resist!

Gid crouched and gathered himself for a spring. John did likewise. There was an instant's breathless wait and then

Ames uncoiled and launched himself through the door that stood open, John hard at his heels.

They found the place empty! The guard was gone!

Ames was puzzled for a moment, but he did not linger to question good fortune. 'Must be at the fire,' he muttered. 'They called all of 'em in to hold the boys up there, I guess. I kind of figgered somethin' like this, but you never kin tell. Come on!'

He thrust one leg through the window in the outside wall of the tower, then the other, hung by his hands for a moment and then dropped. John thrust out his head and Ames called softly.

'It ain't much of a jump. Only 'bout twenty feet, for there's a hole here. Come down limber an' don't try to keep from fallin'.'

In an instant John was beside him and Ames hauled him to his feet.

'All right, son. So far couldn't of been better. Save yore breath 'cause we're goin' away from here.'

He did not pause for questions and John did not ask whither they were bound. Ames set off at a run along the border of Silver Lake and two hundred feet from the stockade they plunged into the sheltering darkness of the pines.

Ames did not slacken his pace, but kept on unerringly through the darkness. He seemed to see cat-like in the dark and once John heard him chuckle grimly and mutter, 'Jus' like huntin' possums back on Dogwood Mountain.'

John lacked this clarity of vision and although he followed in Ames's footsteps he stumbled and bumped against pines. Soon he was breathing in sobbing gasps; Ames ran tirelessly.

They skirted Silver Lake and left it for a path that looked unfamiliar in the darkness. Here Ames quickened his pace and John found difficulty in keeping stride for stride with

him. But with the thought of what lay behind he forced his laboring heart and tired legs.

It seemed hours before Ames halted and peered about him. 'Kind of fools me in the dark like this,' he muttered. 'But we ought to be pretty near there.'

'Where?' gasped John.

'That there place called the Rock House. That's where I aims to hide 'till to-night.'

Abruptly the woods became familiar at the words and John knew where he was. He recognized a twisted oak that overhung the trail.

'It's right around the next bend,' he said.

'Come on, then!' Ames said briefly and set off again at his inexorable trot.

John began to have time for coherent thought and he was filled with questions. How had Ames known of the Rock House? But he knew the answer to that. He had told him of it himself and of the cave cunningly concealed behind the towering boulder.

But why had Ames burned the barracks? That they might escape, of course. But why had he done that?

It was the first question he put when the two men wormed their way into the narrow cleft between the Rock House and the mountainside and threw themselves on the floor of the cave that opened behind. John's body was desperately tired, but his mind raced. Ames answered his question soberly.

'Because, son, you was fixin' to git yoreself kilt, that's why. Ain't no man strong enough to go up agin the combination you was facin'. Then you forgot Mortimer an' Keller was comin' in the mine to-morrow. You know what you planned. I never said nothin' but I made up my mind to this the minit I knowed you had yore neck bowed like you did.'

'I see,' said John slowly. 'But I — we — all of us might have been killed to-night.'

'Reckon so,' Ames agreed soberly. 'Y' can't fry eggs 'thout breakin' 'em.'

'Now what?'

'Reckon the best thing for us to do is to kind of lay here 'till to-morrer night. Things'll kind of ca'm down back yonder. Then to-morrer night me and you's gonna do some tall walkin'.'

'You're going back to the mountains!' John cried.

'I be. Jus' lemme git 'mongst them coves an' hills down on the Warrior an' ain't nobody gonna find me. Soon's they git tired lookin' I'll show up on Dogwood Mountain an' then — well, y' can't never tell.'

'And I'll go with you!' cried John. He was intoxicated at the prospect and his voice rang.

Somehow he thought Ames's grunt of agreement was unenthusiastic.

'I can start over again,' John babbled. His head felt a little light; so much had happened since morning and now this dazzling prospect opened before him. 'I'll wait, of course, and then I'll kind of work my way down to Mobile and get clean away. John Ogletree died to-night in that fire back there. It'll be another man when we leave. I never hoped for anything like this! Go with me, Gid!'

'I can't,' Gid said. 'I gotta stay here an' look out for the Old Woman the best way I kin.'

John sobered at that.

Selma Richie! Never to see her again! To put aside *that* incentive to make a new life when he was released. He dropped his head on his hands and his elation left him. It would be a mighty wrench, but what was there left? He could not go back; that meant to die to slake Mortimer's hatred. And Selma could have no part in the future.

But he threw back his head recklessly; one could always forget, he told himself, and knew that he lied when he thought it. Forget her! Not if he lived to be as old as the hills that surrounded and shrouded them.

The hours passed slowly and dawn sent a finger of light into the cave. The interior was damp and chill and they huddled up in the sunlight of the entrance for warmth. There was no water and Ames vetoed any idea of leaving the cave.

John planned listlessly for the future and Ames heard him with an occasional grunt; the grizzled mountaineer's eyes were alight with the call of home. If John wondered at his silence, he thought he knew the answer.

Noon came and the shadows began to lengthen. Night would mean a relief of their thirst. As for food — Ames had not mentioned that and John was not hungry.

They lay dozing near the entrance of the cave when a step brought them to alertness. Gid motioned John further back and commanded silence. He listened for a moment and then his face cleared.

'Son,' he said heartily, 'I wouldn't be surprised if this here wa'n't somebody you gonna be awful glad to see.'

A shadow darkened the cave entrance and John saw Ames's face lengthen. He turned quickly and faced Evelyn Mortimer!

CHAPTER XXIX

EVELYN stared incredulously; she closed her eyes and opened them as if to clear her vision. The men, too, seemed stricken motionless. John's face hardened and he stiffened; Ames's face, after his first look of amazement, became blank. Once he glanced at John curiously but did not speak.

For an instant the tableau held and then realization of the actuality of what she saw conquered the disbelief in Evelyn's face. She caught her breath and put out a hand to steady herself. When she spoke her words were scarcely more than a whisper.

'They — they told me you were dead — in the fire. I — I couldn't believe that it could be true.'

She leaned against the rough wall of the cave and slid slowly to the floor. She did not faint; it was only that her knees were limp; she was too exhausted to stand.

She did not take her eyes from John's and he met her gaze stonily.

'Why did you come here?' he asked harshly.

'I — I didn't know where else to go,' she said painfully. 'I couldn't get any one. I couldn't find Selma or Dr. Richie and they — they said you were dead. I wouldn't believe that. It just couldn't be true. I — I remembered this place and the message I had sent you. I thought *maybe*, if what he — he said wasn't true, that you'd be here. I was hoping against hope. So I came — when I could. That's all.'

Her face was drained of all color; her features were pinched and strained and her eyes desperate. It was the first time John had seen her since that day in the stockade and the memory of his bitterness came back. But for her he

would never have known the anguish of Alamosa. He did not soften at the sight of her distress.

'And now that you have found us, I suppose you will go back and tell them that ——'

Evelyn cried out, putting up a supplicating hand. 'Not that, John! Not that! Please. It isn't fair. I couldn't bear it if you meant that. You don't, do you, John? Please say that you don't!'

John broke the tension of his attitude and turned away his head. 'I suppose not,' he muttered ungraciously. 'But when I think of ——'

'What I have done to you!' she interrupted. 'I know. I have done enough, John, but I didn't do that. And I've suffered. Oh, my God, how I have suffered!'

'What do you think happened to me?' he asked bitterly. 'Through you I've lost what little chance I ever had to make a fresh start. Don't you know that!'

'Yes.' She bent her head, her eyes still beseechingly on his. 'That was why I came just on the chance that you *might* be here. It was to help you.'

John shook his head impatiently. 'You can't help me. I'm done for; John Ogletree died back there in the fire last night. Whoever leaves this place will not be John Ogletree.' He laughed ironically. 'Why, I had some sort of idea of fighting my way back; I had an incentive. And now ——' He broke off with a gesture of hopelessness — 'What's the use! I can't even do that.'

Evelyn struggled to her feet, speaking in a sort of gasping hurry, the words tumbling from her lips.

'But you can, John. Oh, you can! That's what I want to tell you. They think you were burned back at the prison. They won't look for you ——'

'Who told you I was dead?' he demanded.

'Paul!' She shivered and a shadow crossed her face. 'He

— he did — and laughed. But that doesn't matter. I didn't believe him. I had faith ——' Her voice rang on the word — 'faith to hope.' She smiled mistily. 'And I've courage to carry on for your sake. If I have that you know you have, too. You can make a fresh start; a better one than you planned ——'

'Hunted! A fugitive! Always afraid! A fine start! And I'd leave behind everything I wanted — once.'

She did not heed his interruption. 'Maybe you won't be John Ogletree outside, but you'll have John Ogletree's head and heart and you'll be wiser. I'll help you, John. I came to do that.'

'I don't want help from you!'

She flinched at the ungracious speech but went on bravely. With hurried and trembling fingers, she fumbled in the purse she carried and brought out a wallet that bulged. She extended it to him.

'Here! Take this! It's all I had or could get. It's what I planned to use before. Not much, but enough to get you away; you won't be penniless.'

John backed away from her. 'Take that money! Your money! No, it isn't your money. It's his. Why — why, before I'd touch a penny of it I'd go back to Alamosa. Can't you understand what you've done to me? From the very first day you — and now it's all come down to this. Keep your money. I'll take my chances with Gid, here, without it.' All the concentrated bitterness of his misery was in his eyes as he looked at her. Thinking of Selma Richie, he was merciless. Other things he might have forgiven, but this woman had made it forever impossible for him to . . .

Evelyn's outstretched arm dropped and her eyes filled with tears. She glanced despairingly about the cave and saw Ames, seated on a boulder, gazing out the narrow opening, apparently oblivious of them. She had forgotten Ames.

Now, at the silence, he turned his head and looked at her. Something in his eyes arrested her.

'You tell him,' she appealed wearily. 'Can't you help me?'

Ames rose slowly, his grizzled hair almost touching the stalactited roof.

'Son, it ain't like you to be onforgivin',' he said gently. 'Yore words is uncommon hard.'

'I suppose you'll tell me to forget everything that has happened and say that I don't mind the future. Well, I do! And I shan't lie to her. Why should I?'

'No-o, ain't no need f'r yore lyin',' said Ames slowly. 'But I heard Brother Shoemaker onct read somethin' from his book 'bout the Lord would tend to the payin' back bisness. Whut's His bisness you don't need to fret yoreself 'bout. You ain't got no need to be so onkind. The lady's tryin' to help you. She means well ——'

Evelyn interrupted with a dreary laugh. 'Yes, that's it. I mean well. I've always meant well. My road to hell is well paved.' She struggled for control of herself; to regain her poise. It hardly seemed possible that her face could be whiter or her features become more pinched, but they did under John's eyes. Evelyn's drooping figure lifted; she grew calmer; she accepted the inevitable and when she spoke again her voice was mournful; with a curious sort of detached regret.

'I — I've made my appeal, and I've failed. I'm not surprised. I — I just hoped that maybe you could understand.' She shook her head in quick negation. 'Oh, I didn't expect anything; nothing material, that is. I'd be stupid if I thought the future could hold anything for you and me.'

She was terribly in earnest and she made no attempt to hide her heartbreak. 'I had my chance for happiness, and I did not recognize it. I'm not quarreling with the justice of it;

I've never done that. But I didn't think I could bear what seemed to be true. At least you aren't under those smoking ashes back at the stockade. I've that to be thankful for.' She smiled wryly. 'It's something; more than you know. I haven't that to reproach myself for or to live with — after you are gone. Perhaps it is more than I deserve.'

John stared at her, fascinated; he would have been less than human not to have been moved by her sincerity and yet he could not speak. He paid involuntary tribute to her courage. Her head was thrown back and she was gazing at him as those do who look their last on the dead. She was telling him good-bye, mutely, uncomplainingly. He attempted half-hearted comfort. 'I'm sorry, Evelyn,' he said awkwardly. 'I — I don't ——'

'I am too,' she answered quietly. 'But there's no need for saying what you do not feel. It's just, I suppose. But it would be a hard world if all of us received only justice and none of us mercy.'

She was controlled now; composed. Her eyes filled, but there were no tears. She looked about the little cavern desperately as if seeking some excuse for delay and her eyes on Ames again seated on his rock.

'Take care of him,' she said, a little break in her voice. 'Oh, take care of him.'

'Ma'am, I 'spect I think just as much of that boy as you do yoreself,' he answered respectfully.

There was a moment's silence. John stood looking down morosely. He was determined that he would not lie to her; he would end it definitely and forever. In a moment she would go out of what life remained to him.

She gathered up her bag, restored the wallet hesitantly to its place and took an unsteady step; a long breath.

She would have turned and gone out silently if Ames had not halted her.

'Wait a minit,' he said. His ears, already regaining their mountain keenness, caught a sound unheard by the others. 'Somebody else comin',' he muttered, and then his face cleared and he straightened. 'Now we'll git down to business,' he said briskly as Selma Richie crowded through the passage and walked quickly into the cave.

John's heart leaped at the sight of her; her blue eyes went at once to his face and he thrilled at the joy and relief he saw there.

'I thought that the fire was your doing, Gid,' she said, 'but I couldn't be sure until I found you. I have been nearly frantic because I couldn't come sooner. But I had to get these things.'

Her arms were filled with bundles and at the words she dumped them on the floor and flexed her arms with a sigh of relief. 'I had to walk it and I had to be careful,' she said. 'I came from Climax. That was what delayed me.'

Her eyes on John she did not see Evelyn, who had drawn back into the shadows. John spoke thickly.

'I — I don't understand,' he said. 'You knew about this? Was it planned?'

'Of course,' answered Selma. Then she turned reproachfully to Ames. 'You should have told me, Gid. Was there no other way than this? You ran a terrible risk.'

'I didn't see none,' Gid answered. 'I didn't tell you 'cause I knowed what you'd of said. An' I had to act quick. There wa'n't no time to wait. He wa'n't figgerin' on waitin' an' I had to git there fust.'

John was looking from one to the other, striving to comprehend the thing their words told.

'You mean you asked Ames to do this,' he said. 'You are risking this — for me.'

'Of course,' she answered simply. 'I told you that I would help. I meant it.'

‘For me!’ John echoed and threw his hands out. ‘What can I say? How can I ——’

Selma smiled at him, her face lighting brilliantly and then sobering. ‘That isn’t necessary,’ she said. ‘I understand.’

They had forgotten Evelyn Mortimer and she stood in the shadows and looked on; understanding the lightening of their faces and the message of their eyes. Paul Mortimer had done this thing to her. She remembered his sneer. ‘I think your chauffeur is interested in Selma Richie.’ Her heart filled but she did not interrupt until Selma, her first excitement and joy over, glanced about the cave and saw her. Selma’s face chilled and she drew back.

‘You here, Evelyn! What ——’

‘Oh, for the same reason you are,’ Evelyn answered wearily. ‘Trying to help him. But he wouldn’t take it from me. He will from you.’

Selma was still unsatisfied. ‘But how did you know they were here?’ she demanded.

‘You needn’t think that, Selma,’ Evelyn answered quietly. ‘He didn’t tell me. The explanation is simple and you should know it. I once asked him — and you gave my message — to come here if he escaped and when they — Paul — told me he was burned in the prison, I came here to see if there was any mercy anywhere — and I found him. Are you satisfied?’

‘Yes,’ Selma admitted. ‘I had no right to ask.’

‘But you did.’ Evelyn shrank from no humiliation in her flagellation, but she could not forbear adding proudly, ‘There is no wrong in loving, Selma, when you ask nothing in return.’

Selma did not answer, but turned to the bundles she had brought; they contained two suits.

‘One of them is father’s,’ she explained. ‘The other —

yours, Gid — I bought in Climax. You could do nothing in white. You would be recognized instantly.' She straightened. 'Now what do you plan?'

'I bin kind of waitin' 'till you come 'fore I decided on anything,' Gid said. 'Me, I aims to hit for the mountains. I guess John kind of figgered he'd go 'long for a while.'

Selma's face paled and her eyes turned to John. Her first elation had gone; the relief of finding both John and Ames was pushed aside by another emotion. They had met only to part. John answered her question.

'Mobile, the sea, a fresh start somewhere else.' He paused and then burst out desperately, 'My God, what else is there to do?'

'You know what that means?' Selma asked. She seemed to be studying his face. They ignored Evelyn, who stood in the shadows and fed on her wretchedness.

'Of course,' answered John miserably. 'It — it means I'll never see you again, never hear from you, nothing. It means the end.'

'And you are willing to do that?'

John groaned. 'Willing! Can you ask that? Willing! Why — why, I'd give anything ——'

Selma interrupted with a question. This was the moment she had foreseen; she had planned to bring it about; she faltered a little at the thought of what might happen if she judged wrongly — and the risk would be his. That gave her pause. His would be the punishment, not hers. Did she have the right to expose him to the danger that only she could appreciate? But this other —— She wrestled with the thought. All day she had been haunted by the knowledge that this moment was inevitable; she had sought in vain to reach a decision.

She heard herself ask the question, 'John, how much courage have you?'

Ogletree looked at her wonderingly. 'Not much — now. It's all gone. I left it back there at Alamosa. Why ——'

Selma ignored his inquiry. 'Surely not all,' she said.

'All but that I borrowed from you — and Gid here.'

She searched his face; he sensed some crisis of which he knew nothing and stared back wonderingly. Once Selma looked at Gid as if to appeal for help and then back to John. Her words were very low.

'Have you enough courage to — to go back — there?'

John could hardly believe his ears. 'To Alamosa?'

'Yes.'

Evelyn could keep silent no longer. She spoke passionately.

'No. John! You mustn't do that. She doesn't realize what it would mean. Paul — Keller — they, you couldn't stand what — I know what they plan! Don't go back, John. For God's sake, don't go back there!' She spoke incoherently; her face convulsed with the intensity of her appeal.

John had scarcely heard their words. He was immersed in the fear of Alamosa and of Mortimer; he remembered when he had screamed under the strap. To face that again! He shivered.

'Go back to Alamosa — you — you mean that?' he asked.

Instantly Selma forgot Evelyn; the decision must be his, but she would help him all she could. She asked another question.

'How much do you trust me, John?'

'Trust you? Why — why, anywhere — anything. There — there isn't any limit. You had a reason for asking?'

'Yes.' Selma paused and they hung on her words; Evelyn in wordless protest; Ames in entire and absolute confidence; he had no doubts and would cheerfully have faced the whole of Alamosa at her bidding. Tense and quiet, John waited.

'You have said it yourself,' Selma resumed. 'If you go with Ames into the mountains, there will be no coming back. You will have passed a river that you can't recross. You will surrender all hope of — of things you might have. Is nothing better than that?'

'Can you show me another way?'

'No-o, only suggest.' Selma paused and marshaled her thoughts. She was fighting for him even if he did not realize it yet. 'Father once said to me that people never cared about misery in the abstract, but that with single persons it was different. You — you are an individual; I know what you have been through here, but no one else does.'

'And then?'

Evelyn forced herself to calmness; she wanted to interrupt with protests; with pleadings; she was afraid for herself and for him. Once again in Alamosa, his presence would inflame Mortimer. Now that Paul thought him dead, perhaps there was some chance that he might be pacified. She could never wholly outgrow her selfishness and another thought gnawed at her. Let him return to Alamosa and Selma Richie might save him. Away, gone forever, lost on the highways of the world he and Selma could not . . .

She did not finish the thought but waited for him to speak. Surely he could not again face Alamosa and the dreadful certainty of . . .

'And then what?' John asked.

'Evelyn says they think you dead. You have a moment of freedom. Go to Montgomery, tell Governor Ashmead what happened to you. Appeal to him; he has the power to take you out of their reach back there.'

'You ask me to do that? The Governor might send me back.'

Selma hesitated; it was a terrible responsibility. Perspiration stood out on her face in tiny beads. She felt Evelyn

Mortimer's accusing gaze on her. She straightened and put out her hand. 'Yes,' she answered.

'For you?' asked John.

'For both of us.'

His somber face brightened at the pronoun. 'For us?'

'For us,' she repeated.

'Then, I'll go,' he said quietly.

'John! You don't ——' Evelyn burst out, but he turned to her, his face calm, an air of aloofness about him.

'You can have no part in this,' he said quietly. 'I — I do not wish to be unkind. I thank you for your desire to help, but further words between us would be futile. Will you leave us, please?'

It was the end. Evelyn's eyes were misted and her fingers were shaking. She looked at John's set face and turned away.

'Good-bye,' she said and John answered quietly, 'Good-bye, Evelyn.' There was unconscious dignity in her figure as she walked steadily out and disappeared. They stood in silence until the sound of her footsteps died away and then Ames breathed gustily and went over to where John stood. He put an arm about his shoulders.

'Son, y'ain't never gonna make no mistake doin' what Mis' Selma tells you.'

'I know it, Gid.'

Ames seemed to wish to add something further, but the limitations of his vocabulary prevented. He assumed a cheerfulness he did not feel. His own heart was wrenched at the parting before him.

'Mis' Selma, I done what I could,' he said. 'Here he is. You know best what to do, but so far's I'm concerned, I'm gittin' for the mountains an' I ain't wastin' no time.'

Selma did not demur. 'Thank you, Gid. I wouldn't ask you to go back to Alamosa. You've earned your freedom. Take it and make the most of it.'

'Yes'm, I shore aims to,' Gid said. 'They ain't never gonna ketch me no more, onct I git to the Warrior an' I 'spects to make that to-night.'

With instinctive delicacy, Ames picked up the bundle of clothing and retired to the interior of the cave, leaving Selma and John together. They looked at each other.

'There are so many things I would tell you,' John said. 'So many things. But I must not now. Will there ever come a time when I may?'

'Of course.' There was no mock-modesty about Selma.

'I wonder,' said John.

She gave him of her courage. 'I know it.'

'No matter how it comes out, you must not reproach yourself,' he said and smiled at her. 'I'm taking the risk with whatever courage I have. I'm doing it for — for you.'

'John, are you sure you care that much?' Selma asked tensely.

'More.'

'I'm frightened.'

'You're not. You mustn't be, no matter what happens. It isn't like you.' He extended a steady hand. 'See. I'm fearful no longer. I have you.'

Silence . . . each busy with thought . . . she looking to the future . . . he not daring to and conning the past . . . It was very still in the cave . . . At last he stirred.

'I mustn't keep you any longer,' he said. 'You will be missed. Wish me good fortune and go.'

'But I'm not going,' Selma announced quietly.

'Not going!'

'No. I shall go to Montgomery with you.'

'But think ——'

'Did you believe that I would let you face a risk that I did not share?' she asked reproachfully. 'We will go to the Governor together.'

CHAPTER XXX

It was hardly eight o'clock — a gray, misty morning with the sun hidden under scurrying clouds — when John and Selma walked up Dexter Avenue, ascended the long steps between the frowning cannon of Civil War days, and paused before the Corinthian columns that marked the stately entrance to the Capitol in Montgomery.

The building appeared deserted, but the doors were open and they passed into the dimness of the long corridors.

They had come straight from the Union Station where the morning local from Lareca Junction had dumped them after an interminable journey through the hills, then into the delta country of the Alabama River, and so to Montgomery.

Despite the hour, they had not waited. No place was so safe for John as the Capitol. Who would seek a fugitive convict there? They had discussed the risk soberly. Both knew that discovery that John and Ames had not perished in the fire was inevitable. Nor could they know when that discovery would come. Hence it behooved them to waste no precious minute before the warning was broadcast and the bloodhounds of the State loosed on his trail.

So they had come this early to make their bid for — John hardly knew what he planned to ask; a chance; fairness; somehow he would know what to say when he stood before the man who held his life in his hands.

They stood just within the entrance and looked about them uncertainly; behind them Montgomery was sleepily rousing and preparing for the leisurely day; about them the high walls were lined with paintings of stern-looking men; fierce-eyed and heavily bearded. They were the Alabama

notables of other days. Their immobile faces glowering at him depressed John and he shivered, awed by the solemnity of the dim corridors and the somber air of the interior.

As they stood, a small, trim figure dressed in Confederate gray came around a corner and paused at the sight of them. Leaning on his cane, he surveyed them from shrewd small eyes. He was moustached and goateed and held himself with soldierly erectness that told of fighting days now only a dim memory.

John and Selma moved toward him, but he spoke first.

'Want to see the Capitol?' he offered. 'Kind of early, but I'll take you through.'

John shook his head. 'No-o, thank you,' he said with a faint smile at the irony of the offer. 'We want to see the Governor.'

'His office is down that corridor,' he said. 'Last door to your left, but there ain't a mite of use going in there now. The Governor don't come down 'till nine o'clock. Don't you want to see the Capitol? Show you where Jeff Davis stood when he took the oath as president of the Confederacy; show you the flag of the old Fourth Alabama. There ain't many capitols as interesting as this one.'

John looked at Selma; an hour to wait! His nerves were strained. Reading his thought she nodded; perhaps this would serve to speed the lagging minutes. The gray-bearded ancient saw the nod and took charge of them briskly.

'Now in here is all th' Indian relics,' he said in a nasal sing-song. 'All of them were dug up from mounds on the Tombigbee River. Now over here in this case are Civil War relics . . .'

John paid scant attention; Selma stood close to him; once he felt the pressure of her arm, heartening, sustaining. Exaltation flooded him. With her presence about him;

with her faith wrapping him like a mantle, he was armored; nothing could touch him. The reservoir of her tenderness was limitless. His throat filled at the thought of it. The guide droned on . . .

'...and here are the flags.' The trim little figure snapped to attention; his eyes fired and his right hand came up to his hat brim in a salute. 'See the holes,' he said reverently, his voice hushed. 'They was made by Yankee bullets. They captured those flags, but they gave 'em back to us and I'm the color-guard.'

His moment of sentiment over, the little soldier introduced himself. 'My name's Sangrelli—Charles Sangrelli.'

He paused expectantly and John wondered; he was friendly. John was amazed. He had been shut away so long that he had forgotten the amenities of freedom and equality until the guide repeated his words.

'My name is Sangrelli. I was with Forrest. I came over from Paris in '62.'

John hesitated only a moment. 'My name is Ogletree and this is Miss Richie.'

Sangrelli's heels clicked and he bowed from the hips, sweeping off his hat with a courtly gesture. Selma smiled at him and voiced the question that was uppermost in her mind.

'What sort of man is Governor Ashmead?'

'We all think mighty well of him down here,' Sangrelli answered. 'There's his secretary now.'

John and Selma followed immediately; they must not be forestalled. As they walked away with a word of thanks, Sangrelli cleared his throat significantly. John harked back to similar sounds and paused.

'Lend me a dollar,' he whispered to Selma and when she had given him the bill he slipped it into the guide's hand.

Sangrelli beamed. 'When you get through with the Gov-

ernor come back and I'll show you the rest,' he called. 'You ain't seen half of it.'

The irony of it! John met Selma's faint smile reassuringly. He was invincible.

The secretary lowered the paper when they entered the anteroom of the Governor's chamber and to him they made their request.

'The Governor hasn't come down yet,' he said. 'If you will wait ——' He gestured toward chairs and they sat down.

They could not talk. The secretary, bald and well fed, resumed his paper. In the magnolia trees that crowded the Capitol grounds birds chattered, and occasionally there was the liquid call of a thrush. Beside him Selma sat tense and poised and John longed to communicate to her some of his confidence. She was afraid for him, but he was not fearful.

Steps echoed in the corridors outside, but still the Governor did not come. John found some of his exaltation leaving him.

He wondered what Gid Ames was doing. Had he gotten safely away? They had parted from him the night before in the darkness of the cave behind the Rock House. They had waited for the night and then they had separated. They had eaten the lunch that Selma brought and John remembered now that Selma had only nibbled sparingly, slipping the remainder of the sandwiches into Ames's pocket.

'You'll need them, Gid,' she had said.

Ames never questioned anything Selma Richie did. 'Yes'm. Thank you, ma'am,' he answered. 'I reckon I will. But I shore hates to see you go hongry.'

'Oh, I had something in Climax. Don't you worry about me, Gid.'

Ames had changed from his convict white to the suit that

Selma had brought and John had done likewise. It was quite dark and Ames rose reluctantly.

'I guess I better put out now,' he said slowly. 'I'm goin' east, but ef you folks is goin' to make that there 'commoda-tion on the Tidewater Northern you'll head north for Lareca Junction.' The moment of parting was at hand. There were few words. Mountain people are emotionally inarticulate and Gid was not betrayed even in his sorrow. He laid a hand on John's shoulder. 'Son, I guess it's quit-tin' time,' he said slowly. 'It's kinder hard to go like this, but I'm leavin' you with Mis' Selma. You bin mighty good to me ——'

'Oh, Gid, you're wrong,' John interrupted. 'It's the other way about. You have done more for me ——'

But Gid would not have it so. 'You just do what Mis' Selma tells you, son, an' you'll come through all right.'

'I'll never forget you, Gid,' John promised. 'Maybe some day I can do something that will ——'

'Nemmine 'bout that.' Gid walked over to Selma and stood a moment before her in worshipful silence. His throat worked, but the words just would not come. 'Mis' Selma, I done the best I could,' he said thickly. 'I ain't never gonna fergit neither of you. An' please, Mis' Selma, don't you fer-git old Gid.'

'I won't,' promised Selma solemnly. 'And Gid, I shall not make my appeal to the Governor for John only. I'll speak for you too. We're not going to forget you, Gid. You can depend on me, Gid.'

'Yes'm. I knows it, Mis' Selma. The Old Woman will allus know where I'm at.'

The darkness swallowed him, but his voice came back.

'Take keer of yoreself, son. Good-bye, Mis' Selma!'

'Good-bye!' they chorused, and stood until his footsteps died away.

John knew that Selma was weeping quietly. His own heart was wrenched at the parting. His bitter words of his first day at Alamosa came back to haunt him. 'To hell with friends! I'll sink or swim without them.' How desolate he would have been had he persisted!

'It's time we were starting,' Selma said at last. 'I don't think it's safe to go to Climax. We'll walk across to Lareca Junction. The morning train goes through there at four o'clock.'

The journey was ghastly; John marveled at Selma's indomitable will on the twelve-mile tramp. She must have been desperately tired, but she never lagged. Nor would she permit him to slacken his pace.

'We must make that train,' she said inflexibly when he would have halted. 'I can rest later.'

All through the night they had stumbled along the mountain road, coming at last to the little junction just as the new moon was fading in the west.

And then the endless run through the hills to Montgomery. John made Selma as comfortable as he could. He brought cool water to bathe her white face and she slept a little, moaning uneasily and waking with a start to put out a quick hand for him. There had been little talk between them; their anxiety had been too great for words.

He turned his head and looked at Selma now; she smiled back at him; her courage was unquenchable though her face was white. John moved restlessly. The delay was tugging at him; once he felt a thrill of panic. Suppose the Governor . . .

A man walked into the anteroom and his clear blue eyes swept John and Selma appraisingly as he passed. He was a striking figure; frock-coated; white vest; small — yet with a leonine head and long hair shot with silver thrown back from his wide brow in studious disarray. His walk was consciously

important but not quite a strut. John knew that he looked at the Governor of Alabama.

There was a brisk greeting and the secretary put down his paper and followed his chief to the inner chamber. He reappeared in a moment.

'Governor Ashmead will see you now,' he said, and ushered them into a high-ceilinged room with an old-fashioned fireplace before which stood the Governor. They could see his furrowed face grow expressionless as they entered.

The Governor misread them and settled himself. He judged them to be pleaders for clemency for some relative who had run afoul of the law and he prepared himself. He was callous of necessity. In this room was distilled the essence of the misery of the unfortunate among two million people. Here mothers begged for the life of a son; wives from their knees held up babies with sobbing pleas for mercy. 'Oh, Governor! If you'll just save him! Don't let ——' Ashmead thought uncomfortably of his mounting pardon and parole record and prepared to be impassive.

But John's first words shook him out of his indifference. John paused just inside the threshold and heard the secretary close the door softly behind him. He could feel Selma at his elbow. He met the Governor's eyes fairly.

'I am an escaped convict!' he cried stridently. 'I have come to ask the Governor of Alabama for justice!'

Ashmead stared at him, one hand thrust into the bosom of his waistcoat and the other fingering his pearl-gray stock. He had been balancing himself on heel and toe before the grate; the slow oscillation halted.

'An unusual beginning, sir,' he said at last; his voice was sonorous and reverberating in the confines of the room. Ashmead was Alabama's favorite orator and he was rarely, even in ordinary conversation, unconscious of it. 'An unusual beginning, sir. You surprise me.'

John had not expected that and he did not answer. Ashmead's eyes bored him for an instant and the mellow voice resumed.

'No citizen of the great commonwealth of Alabama appeals in vain for justice under the shadow of the dome of the Capitol,' he declaimed. 'Of what injustice do you complain?'

'Is embezzlement a capital offense in this State?' John demanded.

'By no means, sir.' The Governor never employed a simple negative when he could avoid it.

'Then I appeal to you from a death sentence for that crime.'

'You amaze me!' The Governor unbent a little. Here was something unusual; no man not a shrewd judge of human nature is elected Governor of Alabama and John's face told its own story. 'An escaped convict, you say! And you come to me asking justice!' Governor Ashmead subjected him to another searching scrutiny. His interest was arrested; his own innate love of the theatrical was stirred. He sat down in the chair before the desk piled high with papers in utter disorder. He adjusted the tails of his frock coat nicely and passed a hand over his long hair.

'Very well.' He motioned to another chair. 'Tell me your story.'

Selma slipped into a seat and the Governor eyed her sharply but asked no questions. John advanced a step and his tense figure relaxed a little; he had won the right to state his case, and he did not sit down. All the accumulated bitterness and impotence of the months of Alamosa lent him strength. The man before him wielded the delegated powers of a great State; small he might be; a poseur; but he sat in the seat of the mighty and John made his plea.

Afterward he could remember little of what he said; he

spoke with such intensity that his body quivered and his words were winged with the poignancy of their import. He was conscious only of the small man before him, who listened intently, blue eyes fixed on his; John lost himself in the passionate force of his appeal. Suddenly it seemed that he was speaking for other men besides himself; voicing their woes; crying out the wrongs they had suffered; some of them even greater than his, and there were many whose tongues were forever silenced. Thrice-armed in the memory of what he had endured he held Ashmead motionless in his chair, spellbound by the picture he drew.

'... I'm through, sir. That's my case. I am appealing to you, sir, for a chance — afterward. I was a lawyer once. I know the intent of the law. Nothing like this was ever intended. Punishment? Yes. A penalty? Yes. Vengeance? no ...'

How long he talked John never knew. He came to himself dragging a hand across his dripping forehead. He felt spent; Selma had given him the chance; he had done his best. His head sank a little.

Ashmead cleared his throat and rose pompously.

'A great speech!' he said. 'A great speech! What a pity there were no others to hear it!'

John's heart sank. Was that what he had done? Made a speech! He had only told what he knew and remembered. He spoke without raising his head. 'You are enough, sir!'

John did not see Selma in her chair, her face buried. Every word had reached her; for the first time she knew to the full what John had endured. She had been cruel to him. She had reproached him because he shrank from such an ordeal. Even she had not known all these things. If only she could tell him how sorry she was . . . if she could make up to him . . . She was filled with a great longing, but she lifted her head sharply when the Governor spoke.

'You confess that you are guilty; you are a convicted embezzler and you come before me with charges of the very gravest nature against officers of the State — my own official family. And even graver allegations against those with whom we are in amicable business arrangement. You ask me to accept your unsupported word that these things are true. I can hardly believe it. I am not wholly unacquainted with our prisons. Why, right here in Montgomery, sir, we have a prison that has attracted the commendation of a Nation. You ask me for justice, sir, and I ask you for evidence — for proof of what you say.'

John paused uncertainly and his face became vacant. Proofs? He had no proofs. The others? They were merely convicts such as he! Would they support him? He knew the answer when he asked the question. They would not. They would fear the certain penalty. Despair gripped him as the Governor waited expectantly . . .

Selma was on her feet pointing. 'Proofs!' Her voice rang. 'We have proofs, sir.'

John turned to her wondering. Governor Ashmead bowed with elaborate courtesy.

'I shall be most happy to hear them, Miss Richie.'

'See them, Governor. See them, sir. You might doubt your ears, but you will believe your eyes.' She moved out into the room and spoke to John. 'Take off your shirt, John.' He seemed in a daze, but he obeyed. 'Now the undershirt.' John stood unclothed to the waist. 'Now turn around.' Mechanically he did so. Selma's voice rang again. 'There is your proof, Governor. There is your evidence, sir.'

Ashmead stared, sickened at what he saw! The macerated flesh told its own story . . . scarce-healed cuts . . . the print of the brass-studded lash . . . why, the man had been beaten until his body was scarce recognizable as human . . . this . . . this thing was horrible. . . .

‘Is it enough, sir?’ Selma asked clearly.

For once the Governor forgot to be theatrical. ‘It is enough,’ he answered simply. ‘What do you want me to do?’

CHAPTER XXXI

MORTIMER entered the room quietly, closed the door behind him, and put his back against it. Evelyn looked up at his step and at the sight of his face sprang to her feet.

Wide-eyed she stared at her husband. There was something sinister about him. His heavy face was lighted by some inward emotion that seemed to consume him. She could see he held himself in check by conscious effort. Involuntarily she stepped backward from her chair. Suddenly she was afraid.

His eyes fixed on hers, Mortimer advanced into the room with menacing deliberation and for each step of his forward she took another backward until she could retreat no further but stood at bay against the wall.

Mortimer never took his eyes from her. For a moment she thought him insane, but even this could not add to her fear. Mortimer's arms dangled and she thought that he crouched as he came slowly toward her.

She pressed one clenched hand against her lips. Should she scream? Who was there to hear? Mortimer halted and surveyed her darkly.

'You thought you would cheat me, didn't you?'

'What do you mean, Paul?'

'You planned this. You are shrewder than I thought and less sensible. I have warned you not to try me too far. You would have done well to have listened.'

'I have done nothing, Paul.'

'Liar! Save your breath. It will do you no good. I want the truth and I'm going to have it.'

Her head lifted at the epithet and her white face grew

paler. Some of the terror left her eyes; she was not a woman to be cowed. Her first shock over she fronted him and if she was afraid there was nothing in her manner to tell him.

'I don't even know what you are talking about, Paul.'

Mortimer's face wrinkled in a sneer. 'Your pose of innocence won't help you. I might have been fooled once but not again. Ogletree wasn't in the barracks. He wasn't burned. He got away.'

He saw her face change and his own face hardened at her evasive question. 'How do you know?'

'When the ashes cooled we searched them. No one was in that building when it burned. There was no trace of bones in those ashes. Ogletree got away and Ames with him.' His voice rose harshly. 'Now where are they?'

'How should I know, Paul? I did not ——'

'You shouldn't know, but you do. Where is he?'

'I don't know, Paul.'

Mortimer's head hunched down between his shoulders and he moved a step closer. She saw his fingers open and close.

'Don't try me too far! You know you planned for him to escape and it failed. This time it didn't fail. Now where is he? Tell me. I'm going to have him back here in Alamosa, and you're going to help. Hear that! You're going to help. Where have you hidden him?'

'I haven't hidden him, Paul. I don't know where he is. I hope I never see him again.'

He sneered. 'I suppose you do. Then I wouldn't either. But you will. I'm going to see to that. Where is he now?'

'I don't know, Paul.'

Mortimer lifted a finger and shook it at her. His face was almost black and the veins on his neck swelled and bulged. He seemed poised for a spring, but she did not shrink as he approached closer.

'Where is he hiding? That's what I want to know. I

shan't ask you again. I'm going to have it —' his voice lowered to a snarl — 'if I have to take it out of you with my hands.'

Evelyn's head went back and she looked at him from under lowered lids; there was something tigerish about her. When she spoke her voice was velvety.

'We will not deal in threats and others besides myself are being unwise. I have never lied to you, Paul. That is, not in material things. And I tell you now that I don't know where Ogletree is and that if he escaped I had nothing to do with it. Do you believe me?'

'No!'

Evelyn made a passionate gesture. 'Then in God's name let us have an end of this. Perhaps I made a mistake, but it was not more than a mistake at the beginning. I won't be bullied any further. As for John Ogletree, if I knew where he was I would not help you drag him back here to torture. I hope he is gone and I hope you have been saved from mur——'

Mortimer struck without warning and she had no chance to avoid the blow delivered against her cheek with his open hand. His fingers marked her and she staggered and fell back against the wall.

Mortimer drew back his hand again. His face was dark. 'I'm done with talking,' he said. 'Now where have you hidden him?'

'I am help——' she began when there was a pounding on the outer door, imperative, summoning.

Mortimer paused undecidedly and his arm fell. 'Wait! I'm not through. Better decide to tell me.'

When he opened the door, the gasping convict delivered his message breathlessly.

'The Cap'n says for you to come up there right away. John Ogletree's up there and——'

Mortimer waited to hear no more. Without pausing to close the door he sprang down the steps and set off for the stockade at a pace that left the convict laboring far in the rear.

Mortimer's face was convulsed as he ran; his black eyes were blazing and his lips worked. He was a big man and his long strides fairly ate up the distance.

Keller's office was deserted, but a guard pointed and Mortimer hurried around a corner of the machine shop to where a group of men stood waiting. Keller, smoking, and with a face that was wreathed in a pleased smile, moved out to meet him. Breathing hard, Mortimer slowed to a walk.

'Good news, sir,' Keller said melodiously. 'You'll be pleased. Ogletree is back.'

Mortimer spoke throatily. 'Where — when, who caught him?'

'Nobody caught him, sir. He walked up to the stockade gates and surrendered. Wouldn't tell me a thing. I asked him where he had been, but he wouldn't open his mouth. I don't get it at all.'

'Where is he?'

Keller pointed and Mortimer moved over to confront John. Ogletree was standing between two guards; he was pale, but unafraid. He seemed expectant and he did not shrink from Mortimer's baleful glare.

For an instant it seemed that Mortimer would spring at him. The guards looked on wonderingly. For a breath Mortimer looked at John and then turned to Keller.

'What are you waiting for?' he asked. 'You know the penalty for escape?'

'Waiting for you, sir,' answered Keller. 'I thought you'd want to see this.'

'I do,' Mortimer growled. 'Forty lashes.'

Keller paused at that. 'Little high, isn't it, sir? Twenty-five is all a man is supposed to stand.'

'You heard what I said. Forty. No argument.'

'But, Mr. Mortimer, you don't want to kill him. Ain't no man living can take forty lashes and live.'

For an instant Keller and Mortimer measured each other. The warden saw the light in the other's eyes; the insane anger that convulsed his face and set him trembling. He had never seen Mortimer so and he wondered. Had the man thrown aside all caution? He shrugged his shoulders and turned to the yard sergeant.

'Fix him,' he ordered. 'We only want the whipping boss and two to hold him. The rest of you go back to your stations.'

John was quickly prepared; he knew the routine. He was stripped to the waist and stretched face downward on the ground. He gave a despairing glance toward the stockade gate.

'Get to it,' ordered Mortimer and the whipping boss took his place.

Deliberately he lifted the strap and it bit into Ogletree's scarcely healed flesh. He twisted and writhed, but the men at head and feet held him immovable. Again the lash tore his back . . . and again . . . He gave up hope . . . He had failed . . . Forty lashes . . . He could not endure it . . .

Suddenly he heard voices and despite his agony twisted his head for a look. The breath left him in a great sigh . . .

Governor Ashmead, his small figure made smaller by his frock coat, stalked across the stockade to where Mortimer and Keller waited. With the Governor was a squat, fat man with a broad, coarse face and flaring nostrils.

The Governor's eyes swept the group and he frowned.

'I scarcely expected to find a scene like this in a prison of Alabama,' he said, his voice accommodating itself to the outer air and rolling across the stockade. 'A relic of barbarism, sir. A relic of barbarism. What is the meaning of this?'

Behind the Governor, Garlock, the president of the convict board, attempted to catch Mortimer's eye and failed. Garlock had protested against this sudden journey to Alamosa. He had no stomach for such descents on convict mines; they should have notice; be ready to receive the Governor in proper state. But Ashmead had been inflexible. Nor would he permit Garlock to telephone ahead. Garlock tried to warn Mortimer, but the master of Alamosa would not look at him.

Mortimer towered over the slight figure of the Governor and spoke curtly. He was careless of his presence; Mortimer had lost all ideas but one. His voice rumbled an answer to the Governor's question.

'I'm punishing an escape.'

'Ah!' The Governor looked at the man on the ground whose back was already crimson. 'And is this the customary method of punishment at Alamosa, Mr. Mortimer?'

'Yes.'

The Governor's blue eyes swept to Garlock. 'You permit this, Garlock?'

'He hasn't anything to do with it,' Mortimer broke in. 'These are my men. I punish them for offenses when I deem it necessary.'

'And what has this man done, if you please, Mr. Mortimer?'

Mortimer stammered over the answer; his voice was choked.

'This — this man set fire to my barracks and escaped when we turned the men into the yard to keep them from burning. That was enough, but he has violated other rules even more important.'

The Governor spoke calmly; even his questions in rounded periods. 'What punishment do you propose to inflict for those offenses, Mr. Mortimer?'

'Forty lashes.'

'And three have done that to his back. This is inhumane, sir: a blot on the fair name of our State. I shall not permit it.'

Mortimer knew the Governor; knew what underlay his flamboyant speech, but he attempted to argue.

'You have no right to interfere here, Governor. These men are leased to me by the State. When I pay the State for them they are mine. I have paid for them. This ground is owned by the Alamosa Coal Company. These buildings are erected by it. The men are mine, Governor.'

'But not to butcher, sir.' The Governor's blue eyes grew colder. 'Not to butcher. The State does not surrender all its interest in its unfortunate wards when it leases them. It still retains a supervisory control in them, does it not, Garlock?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Garlock uncomfortably.

The whipping boss had ceased to wield the lash. The men at Ogletree's head and feet looked on curiously. Mortimer raised his voice.'

'Your own regulations declare that you can punish a man for escaping and for destroying property. A prison isn't a Sunday school.'

'That man is Ogletree, isn't it?' asked the Governor. 'When he came to me in Montgomery yesterday and told me of Alamosa I did not believe him. Now I see that there was more truth than I thought in his words. I should have known it when all he asked was that I come to Alamosa and see for myself. He volunteered to return here as a proof of his sincerity, that I might witness things of which he told me with my own eyes. I have seen and I am convinced. This will bear investigation, Garlock. I shall investigate it personally. I am displeased with you, highly displeased. I had no idea such things existed in this State or that I had a

share in the responsibility for them. Release this man, Mortimer!'

'Release him!' Mortimer was shouting. 'Release this man who — who has made me more trouble than any convict I've ever had; who burns my barracks and — and — Release him! No! I won't release him!'

The Governor had removed his hat. Now he passed a hand over his long hair and settled himself a little firmer on his feet.

'Do you mean to ignore an order from the Governor of Alabama, Mr. Mortimer?'

'To hell with the Governor of Alabama! You aren't governor here. You can't come in here and interfere with the discipline of my camp. If you think I am mistreating the men cancel my contract. But you don't mean any more than any one else inside this stockade.'

'I think I do, sir.' Ashmead had spoken before hostile audiences. He never refused a challenge. 'You will release this man immediately and you will go with me to your office.'

Mortimer's voice sank to a purr. 'I will come with you when I have finished here.' He turned his shoulder to the Governor and spoke to the whipping boss. 'Go on!' he ordered savagely.

The man hesitated and looked at Keller; no man in Alamosa ignored an order from Mortimer, but the whipping boss was overawed by the Governor.

'Keller, you are a State employee. Release that man. Garlock, tell him to do as I say.'

Keller, too, hesitated and looked appealingly at Mortimer. The man must be insane. This was the Governor! But Mortimer was beyond all reason.

'Keller, if you interfere here I'll smash you and you know I can. You stay with me and I'll see that the Governor doesn't interfere.'

'If you don't obey me,' snapped the Governor, 'you'll be in jail in an hour.'

Keller shook his head. 'Better wait a minute, Mr. Mortimer,' he said deprecatingly. 'We'd better get together on this thing.'

The men holding Ogletree waited no longer but released him and he scrambled unsteadily to his feet. The Governor turned his head for an instant to speak further to Keller and in that moment Mortimer acted.

His control of himself snapped at the sight of Ogletree on his feet. With an inarticulate bellow he leaped toward him and swung his fist with all the power of his two hundred pounds. John went down as if he had been felled with an axe and lay still. Mortimer snatched the strap from the whipping boss and stood over Ogletree. His face was black.

'He gets forty lashes if I have to give them myself,' he howled. 'Now who will stop me?'

'I will.'

It was a woman's voice and they turned quickly. Evelyn Mortimer stood before them. She had come up unobserved and paused a little way off while they shouted at each other.

A loose coat shrouded her figure; her hands were in the pockets clasping it about her. Her face was ivory white; her violet eyes staring out of the mask of her features. One cheek showed an angry bruise.

It happened very swiftly. The watchers had not time to move before it was done. They saw Mortimer step smoothly forward; heard his words.

'I thought you had learned your lesson. Well, I still have something to teach you.'

He raised the brass-studded strap and brought it down with all his strength across the woman's shoulders. One end lapped around her and left its mark on a cheek. She did

not raise an arm to ward the blow and it brought her to her knees. They saw her look up at him . . .

Her hands came out of the pockets of her coat. One held a revolver. She thrust the flat automatic toward Mortimer. There was a spurt of flame; a report — flat, venomous; the spat of a bullet striking home on flesh. A little eddy of acrid smoke drifted away.

Mortimer was not knocked off his feet, but even his tremendous body could not stand such a blow. He staggered backward and his black moustache sprang out on his face suddenly livid.

Still on her knees Evelyn Mortimer watched him. He tried desperately to raise the lash. His arms seemed too heavy for the task and after a futile second he dropped the leather strap to clasp his hands about his stomach.

‘Keller!’ he said thickly. ‘Keller!’ He was tottering; swaying forward, collapsing as he spoke, dying on his feet. ‘The damn woman shot me!’

His body seemed to go limp all at once; his knees bent and he sank down, bending over until he rolled to the ground and lay still.

The watching men stood hypnotized. Her eyes on her husband’s body, Evelyn struggled to her feet. She wiped her fingers with a handkerchief that appeared absurdly inadequate; wiped them again and again as if she would never have done. She spoke clearly, her voice hard and dry.

‘He broke me,’ she said. ‘He broke me.’

CHAPTER XXXII

CONSCIOUSNESS returned to Ogletree abruptly. One moment he was lying in blank darkness; the next he was in full possession of his faculties save for a sort of haziness that enveloped him.

The room was unfamiliar; he could identify no single thing his wondering eyes encountered. The linen on the bed was cool and soft to his fingers; dainty furniture was placed about in tasteful arrangement. There were no bars at the windows and trees loomed close outside; cypress trees that bent in the wind and whispered.

This was not the hospital. Then where . . . What had happened? His mind was confused; Mortimer had sprung at him . . . and then he had waked in this room. Had he been injured? He moved tentatively; one foot, then the other; his arms. No . . . Then why did he lie here? He frowned in bewildered questioning and strove to pierce the mist.

At the slight sound of his cautious movement a woman who had been seated at one of the windows rose and came within the range of his vision.

It was Selma Richie! She leaned forward and put a cool hand on his forehead.

‘How do you feel?’ she asked.

‘Why — why, all right,’ he answered and was surprised to find his voice weak and husky. ‘All right. What has happened?’

‘A lot of things. All of them good.’

He gestured about. ‘Where am I? Where have ——’

‘Don’t you really know, John? Why, you are at my home. At my home; this is my room.’

He puzzled over it. 'But you — you live outside the stockade,' he said painfully, his brow wrinkled in his effort to understand. 'How did you ——'

'Bring you here? Easily, John. But I am not to tell you that.' Her eyes were shining and he looked at her wonderingly. Once he had thought her face austere and forbidding; now he knew that it had been strength and courage and steadfastness. She dropped to her knees beside him and took one of his hands in both of hers. The gesture was a singularly tender one.

'John, some one is waiting outside to see you,' Selma said softly. 'Shall I bring him in?'

John thought for an instant that it was Evelyn Mortimer and his face clouded, but her pronoun reassured him. 'Must we?' he asked and when she nodded, 'Who is it? I want to know so many things of you.'

'You will see,' she said brightly and went out the door.

Her father probably, John thought, but when she returned Governor Ashmead followed her; John struggled up on one elbow at the sight of him.

The dapper little Governor walked straight to the bedside and put out a hand. John took it doubtfully. He had forgotten the Governor in thoughts of Selma and himself. Could it be that he was at the top of the hill? He sank back on his pillows and was surprised at the kindness of the Governor's eyes.

Ashmead's sonorous voice filled the little room and overflowed into the hall outside.

'I have waited here in Alamosa until you were able to speak to me, Ogletree,' he said. Ashmead could not divorce himself from the devices of the orator. 'I had a very particular purpose in that, sir, and I have not found my stay unprofitable. By no means, sir.' His eyes twinkled at Selma Richie. 'Nor uninteresting. I trust that you agree with me.'

'I — I — certainly, sir,' John murmured. What could the man mean?

'I reserved for myself the pleasure of telling you of my decision. It is a small vanity, but I prized it.' The Governor gestured largely. 'Have you not wondered at thus discovering yourself removed from the prison?'

'I — why, yes, sir. I have.'

The Governor drew a paper from his pocket and twisted it between his fingers; he was wonderfully softened from the man they had seen in Montgomery.

'When you came to me in Montgomery, you asked for something — justice, was it not?' His voice grew deeper and his hands went up in graceful gesture. 'No man ever appealed in vain to Donald Ashmead for that, sir. I am here to render it to you — render it in full.'

John looked from Selma to the Governor. Evidently she understood, but he did not. 'I — yes, sir,' he murmured.

The Governor could not speak sitting down; it was not in the man. He sprang up and began to orate. He was tremendously impressed with the drama of the moment; intoxicated with the power that lay within his own hands. His head went up and he began to declaim in measured periods; addressing not Ogletree, lying passive on the bed, but an unseen audience. He was speaking to the whole of Alabama and he used his marvelously flexible voice with conscious effect.

'You yourself voiced the theory of the law — punishment — reformation, but not vengeance. The law must protect as well as punish, and when it fails of that purpose it is an indictment of those in whose hands lies its enforcement. I plead guilty to the indictment, sir. It is an axiom of our jurisprudence that ignorance is no valid excuse for infringement of the statutes and that applies equally to the tenets of humanity. And I plead guilty to that, too, sir. Ignorance.

But criminality lies only in permitting a continuation of the evil after it has been discovered, and therein lies my purpose. It shall not continue. By virtue of the power vested in me as the chief executive of this State this duty falls on me and I shall meet it. You asked me, sir, if embezzlement in Alabama was a capital offense and I answer you no. A thousand times no. Why do I refer to this? Because there lies therein a question that must be answered. How far does society go in exacting punishment from those who run afoul of its laws? It is my sober judgment, sir, that you have gone far beyond any limit that the intent of the law contemplated. And I, therefore, by reason of the high duty imposed on me, step in and interpret the law according to the dictates of my conscience. Here, sir, is the answer. Read, and if you do not find it sufficient, tell me what is required.'

With the words he put in John's hands the paper he had been holding. John opened it wonderingly. It contained a single sentence.

John Ogletree is hereby granted an unconditional pardon and his full civil rights are hereby restored.

DONALD ASHMEAD

Governor

John read again; it was hard to comprehend. The bit of paper opened doors that he had thought forever closed. He had not dared dream of anything like this. His eyes went to Selma; she had done this: but for her he would have . . . Her own eyes were filled with tears.

Ashmead was looking at him intently; a half-smile parting his lips under his moustache. John strove to speak, but could only stammer:

'What — how — I can't thank you, sir. If you — knew what this means to me — if — I shall justify your — I had not expected this.'

The Governor reseated himself. He was unexpectedly

human. 'Never mind the thanks, my boy. I know how you feel. Your punishment has been sufficient; your lesson has been learned. By this act I not only serve myself and you, but I serve society, which must be the aim of all those who carry the responsibility imposed on me.'

'Selma!' cried John. 'You — this is yours ——'

'I know, dear. But wait.'

'I could have left this with her,' Governor Ashmead said, with a nod toward Selma. 'She would have known what to do, but there was something else. Truth will prevail and the old order ever changeth. I have seen and I do not propose to remain idle. Never again in Alabama shall it be possible for murder to be done in the name of the law on the helpless and unfortunate wards of the State. I make you the solemn pledge. Ignorant I have been, but not consciously so. The penal institutions of this State shall change until the finger of scorn can no longer be pointed at Alabama. It is a tremendous task; one that requires wisdom and caution and understanding. I shall not be able to accomplish this alone. I shall need help and I shall want yours. It is this that I remained to say to you.'

'My help, sir! But I don't understand how I can.'

'Your help. The convict lease system is doomed. I have already placed Dr. Richie in charge at Alamosa preliminary to a cancellation of the contract. No other contracts will be renewed and the great State of Alabama will have ceased to traffic in human blood — no longer will we countenance legal slavery. The day of human bondage is gone in this State and please God it shall never return. Will you help?'

'Any way I can, sir!' John's voice was wondering. Alamosa contract cancelled! What would Mortimer say? He voiced the question.

'Mortimer?' echoed the Governor and turned to Selma. 'You have not told him?'

'No, Governor, I waited for you.'

Ashmead's voice was solemn. 'Mortimer has escaped us; his case lies in the hands of a higher court than any I could invoke and from its decrees there is no appeal.' Seeing John's uncomprehending stare he spoke plainer. 'Mortimer is dead, John. He didn't live an hour after she shot him.'

'She?'

'His wife.'

John was silent, appalled. So it had come to that. He was bewildered. Selma was right. So many things had happened!

'And what of Mrs. Mortimer?' he whispered, horror in his eyes.

'The coroner held that her act was justifiable homicide. Self-defense. A verdict in which I concur. Had there been a necessity I would have appeared as a witness in her behalf. She is in Birmingham. I do not think she will ever come back.'

'And Keller?'

'We were more fortunate there. I have been investigating the records of the mine and the prison. You are not the first man marked down for slaughter. Keller is in his own jail. He will be fortunate if he is not hanged. There are graves in the River Cemetery that must be explained. I shall see that the explanation is adequate.'

John thought soberly. . . . He asked another question.

'You have not told me, sir, what I am to do.'

The Governor's words again grew ornate. 'In the task that lies before me I must have the advice of men who know prisons as well as prisoners. You have been through the fire and have emerged. Who is so well equipped as you to advise me? With me you shall be the advocate of these unfortunates whose lot it is my purpose to lighten. When you have recovered sufficiently you will report to me at Montgomery.'

You are to be my personal representative in the management of the prisons, working in coöperation with the convict board. I have dispensed with Garlock. Politics sometimes requires us to accept instruments that otherwise we would not employ, but in this I shall recognize no politics.' His voice lost its ring and he became practical. 'Do you understand now?'

John choked. Freedom; work to do; worth-while work. 'Sir, it is so much more than I deserve that I hardly know what to say. It is more than enough. I shall serve you faithfully.'

The Governor's eyes wrinkled shrewdly. 'I am aware of that. The State shall hear of this. I am a practical man as well as a humane one, I hope. Do not credit me with too much altruism. When Alabama hears that this has been done by Donald Ashmead and hears why — as it shall — will there be no recognition of that service? I do not hold such a low opinion of our citizenry. Nor do I feel ashamed of such sentiment. But — no matter about that.' He rose and looked at them, his eyes twinkling, a little smile of understanding on his face. One hand went up to his hair in a characteristic gesture. 'You two have something to say to each other. I have not been blind. I must see Dr. Richie before I leave for Montgomery. I think I will seek him now.'

He halted at the door at John's uplifted hand. 'Governor, I—I — one moment please. You have been kind, so kind that I—I am encouraged to ask one thing more. I—I would not be presumptuous, but — but — May I?'

Ashmead came back to the bed. 'And what is it now?' he said, his smile taking the sting from the words.

John spoke diffidently. 'There was a man — who befriended me and who — who suffered as I did. I owe him my life. He was more deserving than I and now he is a fugitive

— hiding, with a price on his head. I think I can find him. Let me bring him back and — and you will help him.'

'You mean Ames, don't you?' The Governor appeared to ruminate. 'I think that I will leave that as the first task you undertake when you come to Montgomery.' He smiled again. 'Naturally your recommendation will carry weight with me.'

With a courteous inclination of his head the Governor left them and it was characteristic of the man that he closed the door carefully behind him. John turned to Selma.

'Selma!' he cried. 'I want you.'

Unhesitatingly she came to his arms and for a moment they were silent, their joy too great for words. Then John spoke.

'At last I can justify myself to you,' he said. 'I've been passive so long; merely accepting what came. I've been so futile. I counted for nothing. I was merely the—the——' he groped for words, but Selma laid a hand on his lips.

'Why will you always speak of yourself like that?' she asked reproachfully. 'Don't you know that yours has been the highest courage of all — the courage to endure?'

'Perhaps.' He smiled. 'I shall not argue with you. I love to hear you defend me.'

They had forgotten all but themselves. The misery of the days of Alamosa; Evelyn Mortimer; Keller; Gid Ames — everything. John spoke humbly:

'When, dear?'

'Whenever you want me,' she answered steadily.

'Soon?'

She made an eloquent little gesture. 'Now, if you wish. I would have married you in Montgomery. Do you remember?'

'I know, sweetheart, but I couldn't let you then. I was a convict. I couldn't take you then.'

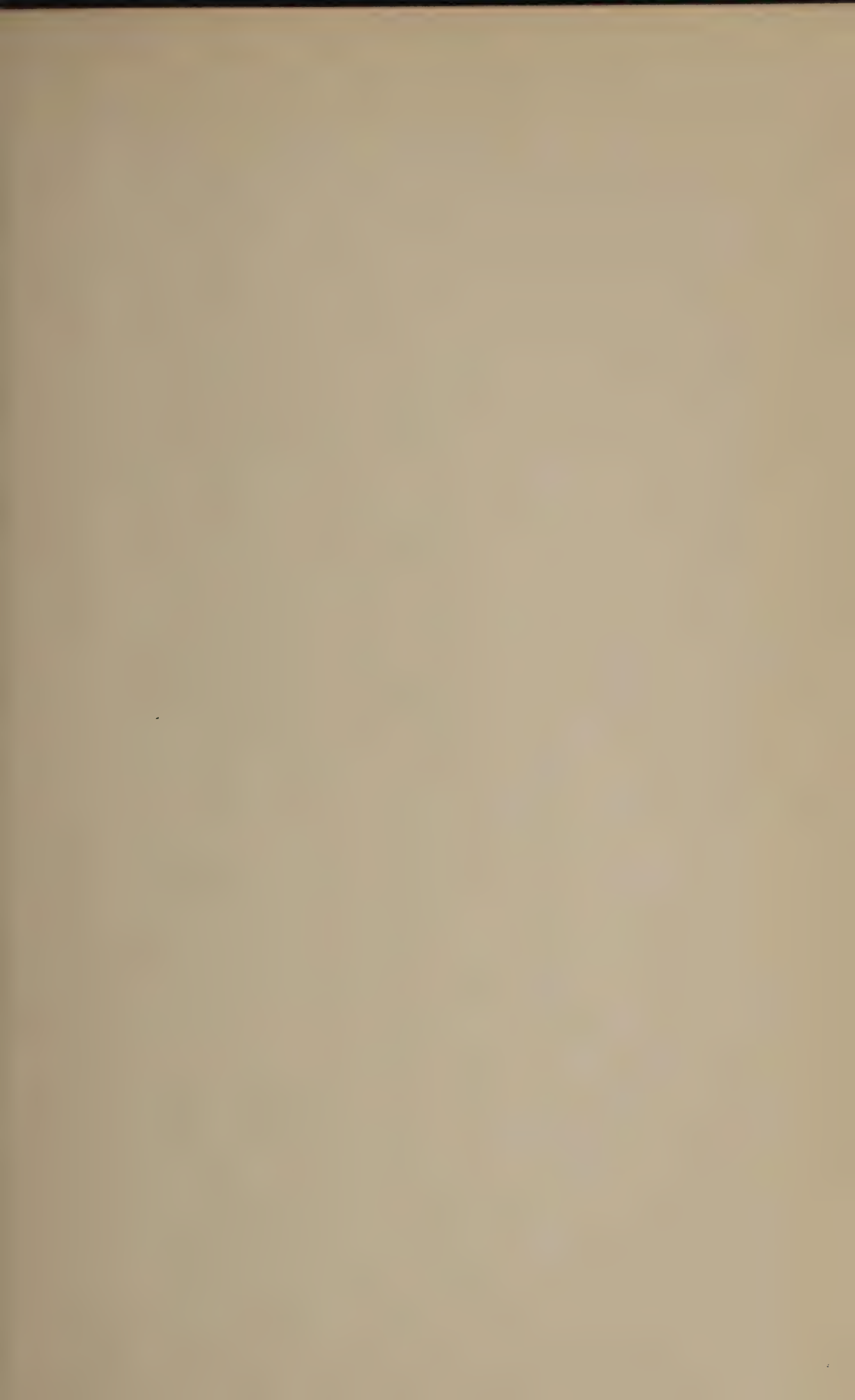
'And now it is different?'

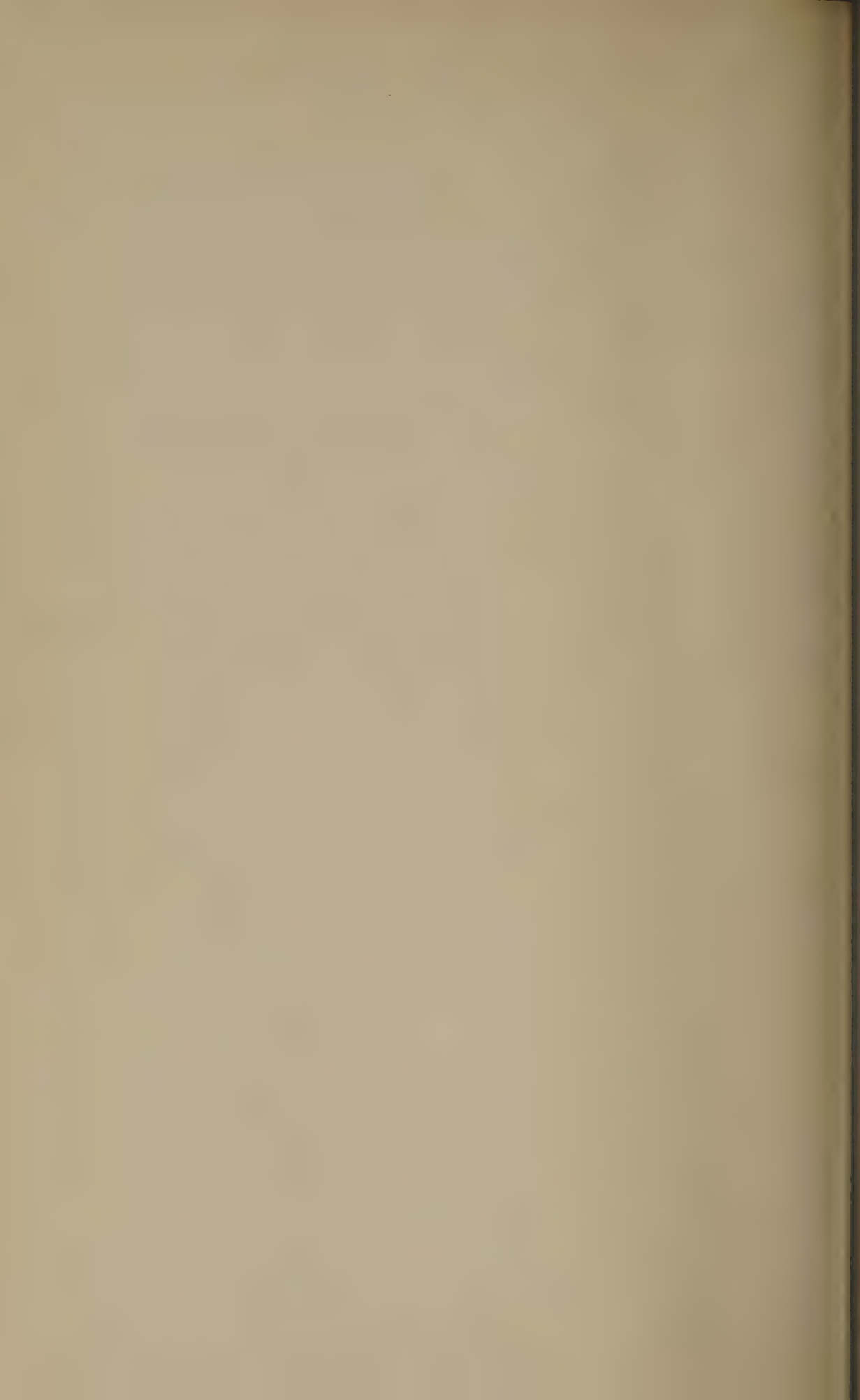
Her eyes filled at his smile. 'Oh, sweetheart, how different!'

She kissed him gravely and he held her close. Outside the wind soughed in the cypress trees and faintly from the prison came the strident clangor of a gong. The room was very quiet.

'My cup runneth over,' he said.

THE END



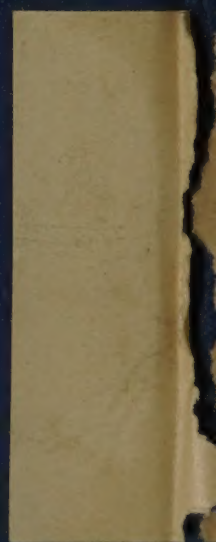




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